

Sounds Like Her

Gender, Sound Art & Sonic Cultures

Christine Eyene



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Beam Editions

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Introduction
Christine Eyene

This publication is the companion to *Sounds Like Her: Gender, Sound Art & Sonic Cultures*, an exhibition commissioned and produced by New Art Exchange and first presented in Nottingham in 2017–18, before touring to venues in England between 2019 and 2020.

Sounds Like Her was conceived as an invitation to experience the aural and visual environments created by Ain Bailey (UK), Sonia Boyce OBE RA (UK), Christine Sun Kim (USA), Elsa M'bala (Cameroon/Germany), Madeleine Mbida (Cameroon), Linda O'Keeffe (Ireland/UK), and Magda Stawarska-Beavan (Poland/UK) – seven women artists working with or around sound.

Why feature only women, one might ask? This project responds to the debates that continue to take place in contemporary art in general – and in music and sound art in particular. It was born out of an interaction with diverse sound art platforms and events, particularly those supporting the work of women artists.

A first impetus to the theme of this exhibition can be traced back to the symposium *Women in Sound Women on Sound* (WISWOS) at the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts in 2015, co-organised by Irish sound artist Linda O'Keeffe, now Head of the School of Art at Edinburgh College of Art. One of the main reasons behind this symposium was that, although sound art is a practice that has gained ground as a contemporary art form, women's contributions to the field remain under-acknowledged. While women have been instrumental in addressing this invisibility, the symposium highlighted that many contemporary practitioners continue to experience various forms of gender bias in a discipline largely dominated by men.

This is also the case with music. In 2015, New Art Exchange, Nottingham hosted a debate entitled *Women in Music*, which raised a number of urgent questions including: Why are only 5% of (music) producers, industry-wide, female? What challenges do women in the industry experience in the face of historic discrimination and ongoing sexism?

A well-known example was reported by Icelandic experimental singer-songwriter Björk in the article 'The Invisible Woman: A Conversation with Björk' by Jessica Hopper and published in the January 2015 issue of *Pitchfork* magazine. In this interview, Björk mentioned the lack of photographic documentation of women working, in the studio, as a way to prove their active role in sound engineering and production. This article, which took social media by storm, contributed to highlight platforms like female:pressure promoting musicians and visual artists in electronic music and digital arts who identify as women. female:pressure was created in 1998 by Vienna-based artist Electric Indigo as a response to the fact that women's activities in the field remain 'less recognized and also easily forgotten'.

An important resource to also acknowledge is the CRiSAP (Creative Research into Sound Art Practice, at the University of the Arts London) and its Her Noise Archive, initiated by curators Lina Džuverović and

Anne Hilde Neset in 2001. Both platforms investigate music and sound histories in relation to gender, and bring together a wide network of women artists who use sound as a medium. Engaging with the CRiSAP – its co-directors, the sound artists and academics Cathy Lane and Angus Carlyle, and their collaborators Holly Ingleton and Salomé Voegelín – both as an audience member and guest speaker, notably at their Sound::Gender::Feminism::Activism conference,¹ has enabled me to take my foray into sound from an intuitive approach to a curatorial inquiry that questions established frames of reference.

Sounds Like Her is the outcome of these encounters. It proposes to continue these conversations in the form of a touring exhibition² and through this publication, highlighting the practice and creativity of women artists in ways that challenge multiple forms of marginalisation; including the many preconceived ideas about women and machines or technology. Indeed, as American electronic musician, composer and writer Tara Rodgers reminds us in her introduction to *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound* (2010), historically the emergence of the electronic tools used in music or sound is a direct result of the technologies developed as part of the military – from broadcasting to controlling sound. The precision and competence required to handle technical equipment has always been associated with male characteristics, while the 'non-technical' or 'soft knowledges' are generally identified as belonging to the realm of the female.³

This observation opens up a whole range of questions. First of all, a techno-centred approach to sound art brings within its fold serious ethical issues around the 'small hands' (often women from countries of the Global South) assembling the components of machines instrumental to this male-dominated creative field. Secondly, not only does this raise the question of access to technology from a material and economic viewpoint, it also touches on sensory abilities.

From a cultural perspective, the history of sound art, like most contemporary artistic practices, has always been anchored within a Euro-American lineage. *Sounds Like Her* makes a point to not only challenge the patrilineal trajectory that has defined the history of sound art, it also calls into question the Eurocentric frameworks that continue to dominate the scene today. Generally speaking, the technicity associated with sound art gives it the aura of a specialist field that requires specific knowledge to understand it, especially in its more abstract-like noise or 'inharmonic' forms. This is not the case in this exhibition and accompanying book. The intuitive approach to sound, mentioned earlier that led to this curatorial project, is in fact the result of a personal experience of being exposed to African music as a child. A music called bikutsi, associated with the Ewondo-speaking, Beti people from Cameroon in central Africa. A traditionally female genre – used as a space to express female-oriented experiences – structured around particular rhythmic patterns, bikutsi is one of many points of entry

to a gender-oriented, or feminist take on sound art. It also serves to posit the notion of sonic cultures, bridging culturally diverse sonic or musical experiences, and providing a broader framework from which each and every one, expert or novice, might approach the work featured here.

Likewise, our exploration of sound is not conceived to solely appeal to the ear. From the outset, the key premise of this project was to address forms of marginalisation existing in the field of sound art in terms of gender, culture, access to technology and sensory abilities. As such, non-sonic materialisations of sound feature prominently. This is reflected in Madga Stawarska-Beavan's print works giving shape to words through sound waves, in Madeleine Mbida's chromatic experiments based on bikutsi's rhythmic structures, and in the work of Christine Sun Kim whose approach to sound as a deaf artist is challenging many preconceived ideas about the medium. Music notes, scores and text in her sketches, video, installation and performance works are ways for Kim to reclaim the audible, physical and social space. The exhibition also delves way down to the very physicality of sound. Such an experience is explored by Ain Bailey in her installation *The Pitch Sisters* (2012), an immersive sound piece whose vibrating intensity invades the body.

Elsa M'bala's practice is anchored within gender discourses. It also explores African and Cameroonian history and archives. The work presented in this book is a documentation of a performance in which she pushes her sound experiments, digging into her cultural heritage and using musical instruments, as well as technology, including machines, the internet and other forms of digital media.

In *Hybrid Soundscapes I-IV* (2017), Linda O'Keeffe goes beyond the personal and internal experience to consider the societal and environmental impact of sound pollution in the context of renewable technologies. O'Keeffe questions the supposedly clean energy sources to reveal their detrimental effect on nature, community and economic models. In a new commission, O'Keeffe has brought together her research conducted in Iceland, Spain, England and China to describe the non-linear way in which sound moves through a space and has an impact beyond its origin.

Finally, Sonia Boyce explores sound and the subconscious. In her installation, a new development of her ongoing *Devotional Series* (1999–present), the names of over 200 black British female performers are inscribed on wallpaper overlaid with placards featuring imagery of these women, plucked from concert announcements, fashion magazines and other forms of popular culture. Boyce is interested in collective memory and on the impact of women who somehow remain marginalised.

At this point, it might be worth sharing the anecdote that has led to the title *Sounds Like Her*. At the end of one of the sessions of the WISWOS symposium, a speaker was having a conversation on the work of an artist whose name I had not heard. As they described the practice of this artist,

who they saw as a key figure addressing a number of underrepresented issues in the field of sound art, I thought to myself that it *sounded like* Sonia Boyce's work – which it was. As I toyed with a couple of titles, this one stuck because it encapsulated the essence of this project.

Sounds Like Her conveys the idea of artistic voice, of authorship, of signature, whereby women artists are inscribing their names within chapters of the vast history of sound art. It also refers to the notion of occupying creative spaces, over time, and leaving one's mark, against gender, cultural and ability-based biases, against amnesia and cultural appropriation. *Sounds Like Her* is an assertion whereby 'her' acts as a counter-discourse to a presumed male entitlement, while not limiting itself to a strict gender definition.

This book is an attempt to contribute opening up new keys of reflection around sound art practices. 'Sounds Like Her: Voices, New Ways to Listen and Sympathetic Atmospheres', by Cathy Lane, focuses on the voice in the work of women sound artists and proposes a different kind of listening, one that is 'freed from the norms and the prejudices of the dominant listening modes of the present'. My own essay, 'Coming at It From a Black Perspective' draws from my Cameroonian cultural heritage and the diasporic feminist thoughts that have informed the concept behind this project and provided the critical tools leading to a questioning of the patrilineal and Eurocentric histories of sound art.

Inspired by feminist authors like Hélène Cixous and bell hooks, Salomé Voegelin's immersive essay 'How Does She Sound?' broadens the scope of the conversation by taking the reader on an exploration of poetry and love as an engine and source of possibility, a 'source of transformation that can unperform a patriarchal centre, dissolving its site and investment' without replacing it.

In a concluding piece, 'Sounds Like Her: A Curatorial Narration' is an imagined promenade through the exhibition, giving an insight into each of the works and the conversations that happen between them, in a plurality of voices that serve a collective reclaiming of the sonic spaces and their histories.

Ultimately, this publication deals with the forms of agencies allowed by sound as a medium, in a landscape and contexts where a voice – both in a literal and metaphorical sense – is far from being granted to all. We hope the pages that follow will trigger further thinking on the sound around us, in our daily life, in its many manifestations, from immaterial to physical, and everything in between. And that the ideas and explorations in this book will encourage us to continue interrogating and challenging the gender imbalances that still exist both in society and in the creative sphere.

**Sounds Like Her: Voices, New Ways to
Listen and Sympathetic Atmospheres**
Cathy Lane

Christine Eyene begins her introduction to this catalogue with the question, 'Why feature only women, one might ask?' An essay¹ written almost fifty years ago by the great, late composer Pauline Oliveros also begins with a question: 'Why have there been no "great" women composers? The question is often asked. The answer is no mystery. In the past, talent, education, ability, interests, motivation were irrelevant because being female was a unique qualification for domestic work and for continual obedience to and dependence upon men.'

While, almost five decades later, this is no longer completely true, at least in some parts of the world, Oliveros's protestation in her essay 'And Don't Call Them "Lady" Composers' is based on her observation that 'many critics and professors cannot refer to women who are also composers without using cute or condescending language. She is a "lady" composer. Rightly, this expression is anathema to many self-respecting women composers. It effectively separates women's efforts from the mainstream.'

Oliveros goes on to argue for a more 'egalitarian atmosphere' where composers, performers, broadcasters and publishers work against this 'subtle and insidious exclusion' and where critics 'encourage an atmosphere which is sympathetic'. She develops this theme of the 'sympathetic atmosphere' in another essay:²

Since very little attention has been devoted to women as composers, my research will be focused on the following questions:

- 1 Do women have something to teach men because of the cultural specialization and vice versa?
- 2 What trends arise in the comparison of many compositions of women? of men? of men and women?
- 3 What working methods do women employ in composing? What working methods do men employ?
- 4 What methods or conditions might be employed to promote and train intuition in musical composition?
- 5 How could this work apply to creative activity in general?

Today, in 2019, we are still not sure what *she* sounds like or maybe more importantly *why* she sounds like that, and the exhibition *Sounds Like Her* (2017–20) allows us the rare opportunity to listen to, view and consider the work of a group of women artists. The works of female-identifying sound artists and musicians still need to be listened to, analysed and contextualised, possibly according to different sets of criteria from those currently in use – maybe in more of a 'sympathetic' or even 'empathetic' atmosphere. In order to do this, a different kind of listening needs to occur, a listening which is freed from the norms and the prejudices of the dominant listening modes of the present.

The work of women within sound arts and music often diverges from the white male hetero-normative practices that are still common in this field. It does this in many ways, but the one that I want to investigate in this short essay is through the use of voice. While I had long been aware that some of the better-known women sound artists³ often used their own voices in their work, it was only through working with students at London College of Communication over the course of a decade that I observed that the work produced by women students was significantly different from that of male students.⁴ One of the most striking features of this was that female students often used their own speaking voices in their work and male students did very rarely. This small piece of research represents the start of my own faltering steps towards the recognition of the need for the development of feminist sound studies, a task that I have happily undertaken with a range of collaborators,⁵ leading me to question both the production of sound work and the work that is produced. My initial questions (which were not so different from Oliveros's, quoted above, but which at that time I had little knowledge of) ranged from whether a work can be said to be gendered and, if so, how this difference is represented, to the gendering of the techniques of sound work, and whether women talk about their work differently. Along the way I was interested in how our knowledge of an artist's gender might inform our understanding of the work itself and how voice might be used. This inquiry gave rise to many issues and conclusions, but one of the most significant findings was that many female students, in common with many women artists, use voice, mainly spoken voice, both their own and other people's in their work. It is what Oliveros called a 'trend'. Why might this be? One approach to investigate this is to look at historical and contemporary cultural assumptions regarding women's voices.

Historically women's voices have rarely been heard in the public sphere. The classical scholar and broadcaster Mary Beard, in a public lecture tracing the construction of the (male) 'voice of authority',⁶ tells us that right from the beginning of writing in western culture there is evidence that 'an integral part of growing up, as a man, is learning to take control of public utterance and to silence the female of the species'. But women's voices are silenced and demonised in more insidious ways. One of these is through the pitch of the voice with the general acceptance that, in order to command authority, women need to speak more like a man and develop a lower-pitched voice, (this was famously adopted by former prime minister Margaret Thatcher). This kind of vocal gender neutrality does not upset or threaten the 'status quo'. Ironically, however, women with relatively high-pitched speaking voices tend to be seen as attractive, by men in particular, with vocal pitch indicating a woman's average oestrogen levels and maybe advertising her state of health and fertility.⁷ Women's voices are also commonly compared with those of animals. Journalist Sally Feldman tells us how, 'they screech like fishwives, laugh like drains, shriek like hyenas, nag like sirens, cackle like hens'.⁸

The voice is linked to a presence, to a body, and the diminishing of a voice is also the diminishing of personhood. Once this link is broken it allows the body to be thought of as something else – possibly as less than a person. Mary Beard⁹ reminds us how Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, repeatedly returns to the idea of the silencing of women in the process of their transformation and thus 'poor Io is turned into a cow by Jupiter, so she cannot talk but only moo'. Writer Carol J. Adams¹⁰ links the oppression of women and of animals through the idea of the 'absent referent' which functions keep our 'meat' separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep out 'moo' or 'cluck' or 'baa' away from the meat, to keep something being seen as someone. Like the voices of women, when the animal's voice is taken away it becomes 'something', in this case a foodstuff to be consumed.

The Judeo-Christian world has long considered the voices of women to be indecent and a temptation to lust. As Feldman points out, women were forbidden from speaking in church:

Not only were women disqualified from liturgical singing, they were also banned from sermonising. When they did begin to take a more public role, they were often ridiculed as freaks. 'A woman's preaching', remarked Dr Johnson, 'is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.' Similar criticism, or worse, has routinely been hurled at the suffragettes, at women activists, trade unionists and campaigners.¹¹

Historically in media and specifically on British radio, women's voices were thought to be monotonous, sharp, unpleasing and unsuitable for the microphone. In the early days of the British Broadcasting Corporation there were no women broadcasters at all, and although this gradually changed there has been a long-established prejudice against female voices in certain areas of radio: sport, news, and music.

So, it seems that this long history of demonisation of women's voices has laid the ground for women working with sound to use voices in ways that both play with, and challenge, historical and contemporary cultural assumptions about women's voices and the male normative in sound art practices. In *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989)¹² by Hildegard Westerkamp the artist uses her speaking voice to guide her invisible audience around Kits Beach, Vancouver. At first, Westerkamp sounds like a radio announcer mediating between the environment and the audience. But over the course of the work, her words become more personal, and articulate her experience of an unbalanced world where individual voices are silenced by an imposed authoritarianism manifested through the sound of the city, culminating in a vision of a more egalitarian world where she is able to reclaim her voice as an individual, casting herself, in the process, as a prophetess or seer who reveals new possible alternative futures. Canadian artist Janet Cardiff

has made a number of site-specific binaurally recorded sound walks. In *Louisiana Walk* (1996),¹³ made for the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, Cardiff's voice whispers in your ear; she invites you to stay with her wherever she leads. The listener is seduced, possessed, as if by the sirens, those mythological half-woman, half-bird creatures whose beautiful, seductive voices belied their horrible appearance and murderous qualities. Cardiff uses the idea of the 'absent referent' to her advantage, as she invites you to couple with her sonic body and experience with her the sonic fiction that she creates. Performance artist Laurie Anderson plays with gender binaries and vocal pitch to produce an imaginary body through her use of the 'voice of authority' or 'voice of control'. This is later transformed into the character Fenway Bergamot.¹⁴ 'The voice started out as the voice of a pompous windbag. It was fun to tweak people who are always telling you what to do'¹⁵ and inhabit the mind/body of a man through her technologised, transformed voice. Brussels-based, Italian artist Anna Raimondo uses her voice and the voices of women that she works with to question and often transgress notions of public and private space. The 2014 video work *Encouragements*¹⁶ features Raimondo travelling around Brussels talking into her mobile phone, loudly broadcasting 'encouragements' gathered from other women. These intimate phrases frequently transgress notions of what is publically acceptable, and we see a variety of public reactions to both the artist and the words she speaks.

When an artist uses her own voice and language in her own way, it is a radical act that subverts commonly held historic and sociocultural prejudices against the existence of women's voices in public spaces. It seems that sound art has provided a space where the recorded speaking voice is decoupled from the physical body and becomes 'liberated', allowing women sound artists to explore their own voices, both sonically and metaphorically, to both critique existing political and cultural realities, to construct new sonic identities and to create visions of new sonic utopias. Women sound artists are employing a wide palette of vocal usage and language (prophetess, seer, siren, seductress, authoritarian windbag) which allow them to challenge the commonly held prejudices, and social and cultural norms that they inhabit daily. This also enables them to suggest other playful, more balanced, realities.

Do we need to consider how our listening excludes, objectifies or demonises? Shall we develop a more 'sympathetic' or 'empathetic atmosphere' to consider these works and others? Should we undertake a more self-critical consideration of which voices we do not listen to, both inside and outside art? How can we begin to develop a different way to listen?

This essay is based on and adapted from previous publications.^{17 18 19 20}

SCORE FOR EVERYDAY TENDER LISTENING (dedicated to Hong-kai, Keiko and Janine)

TO BE PERFORMED ANYWHERE, AT ANY TIME, AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE.

STAGE 1 PREPARATION FOR TENDER LISTENING:

SIT QUIETLY AND THINK ABOUT YOURSELF. CONSIDER HOW ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING MIGHT AFFECT YOUR EVERYDAY LISTENING:

YOUR GENDER
YOUR AGE
YOUR NATIONALITY
YOUR HEIGHT
YOUR LANGUAGE
YOUR CLASS
YOUR HOME
YOUR MOBILITY
YOUR SKIN COLOUR
YOUR EDUCATION
YOUR HEALTH

STAGE 2 PERFORMING TENDER LISTENING:

PRACTICE YOUR EVERYDAY LISTENING WHILE CONSIDERING HOW A CHANGE IN ONE OR MORE OF THE ABOVE MIGHT AFFECT THAT LISTENING. THIS IS BEST DONE WHILE GOING ABOUT YOUR EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES AND IN YOUR EXCHANGES WITH OTHER PEOPLE. IT DOES NOT REQUIRE YOU TO ABSENT YOURSELF IN ORDER TO "LISTEN."

Cathy Lane July 2017

**Coming at It From a Black Perspective:
African Heritage as a Space for Gendered
Discourses and Critical Tools**
Christine Eyene

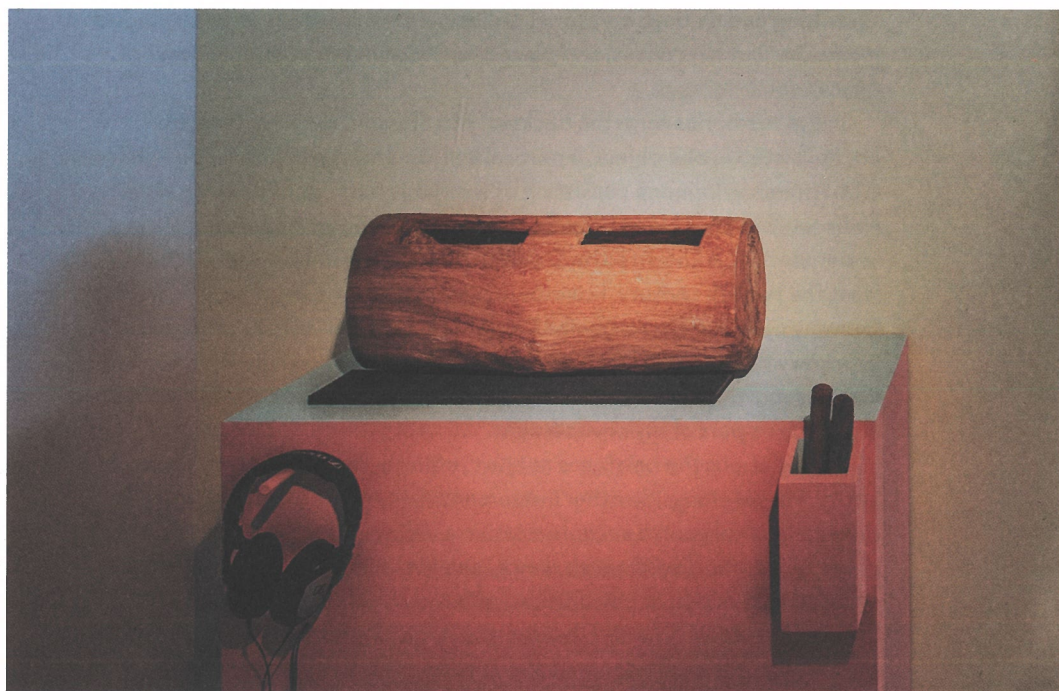
This essay is an evolving piece, of which first lines were started in 2014. It was informed by the research and thoughts that emerged as I was developing the exhibition *All Of Us Have A Sense Of Rhythm* at David Roberts Art Foundation, London,¹ a project in relation to which *Sounds Like Her* could be considered as a follow-up chapter. This inquiry forms part of an ongoing interest in women's artistic practices; an interest demonstrated across numerous writings and several exhibitions. It is born out of an engagement with some of the issues raised by women working in music (as performers, composers, producers) or by women sound artists, about their erasure, underrepresentation, or the undermining of their skills through the perpetuation of stereotypes and preconceived ideas that are often associated with women and technology.²

It is also inspired by an intuitive, or speculative, approach to sound art that proceeds from an informal introduction to the field. This exploration is based upon the experiencing of sonic cultures from Africa and the Diaspora, whose breadth allowed for a tangential take on the medium, while providing the tools to call into question some of the discourses frequently attached to it, particularly when it comes to gender bias and Eurocentrism. This cultural exposure goes deep. It precedes my ability to articulate any thinking about sound, or art for that matter. It is anchored within personal memory and collective history. And it is only recently that I have been able to make sense – in writing and through curatorial projects – of what amounts to childhood memories and anecdotes, and place them within the broader context of Africa's sonic heritage.

These memories form the backstory to *Sounds Like Her*. They are encapsulated in one object, a musical instrument: the balafon. The balafon is an African xylophone consisting of a variable number of wooden slats (with roughly 17–21 keys), fixed to a wooden frame with calabash resonators underneath. It is known to have existed in Africa, notably Mali, since at least the twelfth century. I cannot recall the first time I ever saw a balafon. Growing up in the Cameroonian Diaspora in Paris did not allow the same proximity to the instrument, as would have occurred on Cameroonian soil. But its sonority I knew from a very young age. It even feels like this sound has always been part of my environment.

Talking about the balafon is not just referring to sound as an immaterial entity. Played alongside other instruments (drum, nkul,³ etc.) it performs distinct musical genres anchored within a variety of African cultures. These genres are embodied through dance, and in traditional and contemporary rituals that function as celebrations of our cultural identity.

At the origin of *Sounds Like Her*, and informing the reflection underlying this project, is a musical genre called bikutsi. This became a point of entry into my examination of rhythmic patterns and female performative expressions. It is also the source from which I drew the critical tools to address the erasure of black creativity from within some of the mainstream discourses on sound art.



TOP: Balafon displayed in the exhibition *Sounds Like Her* at New Art Exchange.
 BOTTOM: Nkul, or slit drum from Cameroon displayed in Elsa M'bala's installation. *Sounds Like Her*, New Art Exchange.

Bikutsi: A female performative space

Bikutsi is a type of dance music that is very popular in Cameroon, but which is not well known in the west in comparison to other African genres like the Nigerian afrobeat (Fela Kuti, Tony Allen), Ghanaian highlife music, or Senegalese mbalax (Youssou N'Dour).

It is a musical genre associated to Beti peoples from the region of Yaoundé in central Cameroon. In the Ewondo language, *bi* indicates the plural, *kut* is 'beat' and *si* mean the 'earth' or 'ground'. The word 'bikutsi' means 'let's beat the earth' or 'smash the ground'.

In terms of musical structure, bikutsi is an intense 6/8 and occasionally 9/8 rhythm with quarter note (crotchet) tempo. It is played at all sorts of Beti gatherings – parties, weddings, funerals – which fall into two types:

the ekang phase: linked to the imaginary, mythology or spirituality. On this occasion, the lead instrument is generally the mvét,⁴ a double-sided harp, similar to a kora, with calabash amplification.

the bikutsi phase: when real-life issues are addressed. This time the typical instrument is the balafon.

The dance involves keeping up rhythm in an energetic back and forth movement of chest and hips – a movement now popularised in a variety of black urban dances.

Bikutsi is said to have emerged in Cameroon in the 1940s. This was during colonisation, a time when the European settlers considered most of African cultures as 'deviant'. 'In colonial times, missionaries greeted African musical practices with ambivalence and a tendency to police their expressive lyrics and dance forms', professor Francis B. Nyamnjoh and Dr Jude Fokwang explain.⁵ The Cameroonian scholars cite Swiss Africanist Dr Veit Arlt recounting how 'emerging popular highlife music in colonial Ghana was perceived by missionaries as "obscene" and diabolical, a threat to the Christian values they sought to instil.'⁶ This despise is also evoked by the late Cameroonian author Mongo Beti, a critic of the colonial regime, in his famous novel *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956) in which the main protagonist, a French missionary called Father Drumont, 'considers the local Bikutsi music of colonial Cameroonian forest dwellers "heathen" [and] proceeds on one occasion, in a mad rage, to pounce on the xylophones and knock down the tam-tams of a village that had stubbornly insisted on singing and dancing to their own music on the first Friday of the month.'⁷

Interestingly, traditionally, bikutsi is a female genre. It is said to have been originally performed by women who danced and sang about relationships, sexuality, the lives of notable people, or various observations on society from a female perspective. In his research on bikutsi, American musician

and musicologist Dennis Michael Rathnaw cites Cameroonian author Stanislas Awona in the *Guide to Dances from Cameroon*, who described women gathering under the moonlight 'to sing, dance, and share their ideas according to a language known to them only' and performing 'frenetic dances in rhythms rudely stamped to the ground with their feet'.⁸ He also mentions Cameroonian philosopher and musicologist Jean Maurice Noah who, among other authors, wrote that bikutsi was 'born out of a phallocratic society [...] that relegated women to an extremely marginal status'. Awona adds that, '[a]ccording to Noah, "Beti women were forced to create a space in which to have a voice" ... "a vengeance consciously exercised by the women against the men".⁹

Rathnaw indicates that several researches have established that, initially bikutsi was an unaccompanied form that functioned as women's private space, and that the lyrics gave voice to frustrations and criticism, as well as the hopes and advice that could be passed on from one generation of women to the next.¹⁰ Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any traces of visual or sonic documentation of traditional performances by women.

In the 1970s bikutsi style became electrified with the addition of keyboards and guitars, the latter playing the balafon melodic phrases. While in the 1980s, men dominated the scene, today this genre has been widely reclaimed by women as a space that is often overtly sexual. In his research, Rathnaw examined the work of Cameroonian singer K-Tino who plays on the male/female binary by re-appropriating male discourses on female bodies and transgressing this masculine space. Rathnaw argues that she is challenging male power structures in significant ways and says that her sexually charged performances reflect the objectifying discourses 'surrounding the female body, as evidenced in the manner in which she provokes both male and female dancers in her videos. Here she acts as a social critic, moving between masculine and feminine sexuality and allowing her body to perform sexual aggression as both pursuer and receiver'.¹¹ Some of K-Tino's performances and lyrics have sparked much criticism against contemporary bikutsi, seen as a deviation and degeneration of traditional culture. In this, Rathnaw observes that men have licence to participate in modernity whereas women are assigned to the realm of tradition.¹²

From a black feminist perspective, one could argue that K-Tino and her peers partake in what American feminist Audre Lorde described as women's exploration of feelings, 'spawning ground for the most radical and daring of ideas'.¹³ Lorde also writes that: 'the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation'.¹⁴ 'When I speak of the erotic', she explains, 'I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.'¹⁵

This assertion echoes writings by bell hooks, another influential American feminist, who also addressed black female sexuality in popular culture, notably in her essay 'Selling Hot Pussy' in which she commented that: 'contemporary popular music is one of the primary locations for discussions of black sexuality';¹⁶ a fact that is evidenced about bikutsi music. hooks also wrote that: 'when black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality, in ways that places erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfilment at the center of our efforts to create radical black subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects. To do so we must be willing to transgress traditional boundaries.'¹⁷

Of course, this is not the sole prism through which this Cameroonian music could be examined today. From an artistic perspective, Cameroonian sound artist Elsa M'bala and painter Madeleine Mbida are part of a new generation reclaiming this heritage in their own creative practices. In *L'arbre puissant qui mentait beaucoup* (The powerful tree that lied a lot, 2016), M'bala manipulated a track by the legendary bikutsi band Les Têtes Brûlées (The Hot Heads) in which sound is heard backwards. *Bantu Style* (2017), a forty-one-minute piece, blends field recording, audio archives and an interview with master drummer Abanda Man Ekang discussing the history of ekang and bikutsi music.

Unknowingly, Madeleine Mbida also developed a research on bikutsi through painting. Her work is discussed in further details in this publication. While an interpretation suggests that, the overlaid outlines of dancing figures in Mbida's *Etegue Meko'o* (Foot Movement) and *Etegue Ankug* (Hip Movement) both dated 2016, conjure up a Futurist treatment of the moving body,¹⁸ her chromatic combinations in *Eight in Green* and *Eight in Red* (both 2016), are also reminiscent of rhythmic compositions fully inscribed within the history of African aesthetics and form part of the modern and postmodern African discourses on art.

African rhythmic heritage as a critical tool

If one takes the context of the emergence of bikutsi music in the 1940s as a starting point to the reflection leading to *Sounds Like Her* and, before it, the exhibition *All Of Us Have A Sense Of Rhythm*, it becomes relevant to consider the African writings that have contributed to articulate a thinking around African arts and cultures. In this respect, among the sources to acknowledge is a seminal essay by the late Senegalese poet, cultural theorist, and politician, Léopold Sédar Senghor.

First written in 1939 and published in 1964, 'Ce que l'homme noir apporte' (What the black man brings), sought to establish Africa's cultural contribution to the world in the modernist period. Senghor focused on African culture, the fertile elements of black style¹⁹ and sculpture that he considered as Africa's most typical art form. He also highlighted the

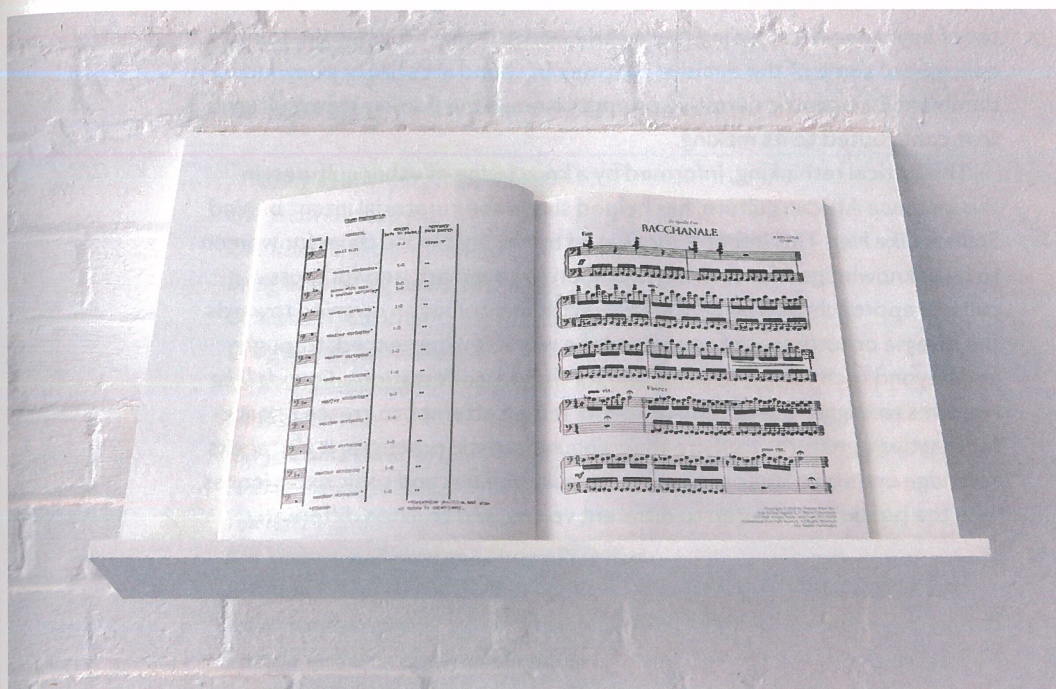
importance of the human figure in African sculpture and noted that, within anthropomorphic statues, the masks were predominant. While Senghor's essay did not account for the diverse creative practices existing in Africa in the 1930s, including painting and photography, his interpretation of rhythm is quite compelling. He describes it as:

... the most sensitive thing and the least material. It is the vital element *par excellence*. It is the primary condition and the sign of art, like breathing in life ... [T]he rhythm is alive, it is free... For *retake* is not repeat, nor repetition. The theme is taken again at another place, another plane, in another combination, in a variation; and it gives another intonation, another timbre, another accent. And the overall effect is intensified, not without nuances. So, does rhythm act, on what is least intellectual in us, despotically, to make us penetrate into the *spirituality of the object*; and this manner of abandonment that is ours, is itself rhythmic.²⁰

Senghor's rhetorical approach to rhythm in sculpture is not far from describing the experience of African music and dance. As a matter of fact, like in sculpture, Senghor argued that music cannot be separated from other African cultural aspects, such as dance and ritual songs. This reflection on the relation between African music and dance, in other words between sound and the body in movement, also extended to the diasporic context by way of the transatlantic routes. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that African American thinkers from the Harlem Renaissance – the 1920s to early 1930s black cultural movement that inspired *Négritude* in Paris²¹ – also explored and debated their African inheritance.

In the decades following the Harlem Renaissance, African American dance pioneers, including Hemsley Winfield, Edna Guy, Katherine Dunham and Asadata Dafora, developed forms of modern dance blending the 'vernacular dance and music that thrived in black urban communities, and the rich African and Caribbean traditions of ritual drama and dance'.²² It is within this context that a young dancer named Syvilla Fort, studying at the Cornish School of Music in Seattle, began exploring her African heritage. Fort, who later joined Katherine Dunham's company, was a student of Bonnie Bird who had danced with Martha Graham in the 1930s, and hired a young musician named John Cage as accompanist. In Bird's studio, Cage would accompany Dorothy Hermann, Syvilla Fort and Merce Cunningham (who was to become his long-term collaborator and partner). Fort invited Cage to compose the music for her graduate recital in spring 1940. Cage created *Bacchanale* in 1939, a piece that also marked his invention of the 'prepared piano'.

Tamara Levitz, professor of musicology at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), who has extensively researched the making of *Bacchanale*, explains that in composing the piece:



John Cage, *Bacchanale*, 1938–1940. Score displayed as part of the exhibition *Curator's Series #8: All of Us Have a Sense of Rhythm*, David Roberts Art Foundation, London, 2015

Cage responded not only to the Africanist gestures that led him to believe Fort's dance was about Africa, but also to her modernist bodily stance and classical expressive attitude. The sounds had to be simultaneously 'African' yet modern, culturally situated yet formalized. Cage found a sonic match for Fort's objective, modernist Africanisms by modifying a European piano so that its timbres resembled those of an instrument (African in origin) discovered in [Henry] Cowell's classes: the marimbula, or Cuban thumb piano.²³

Cage collaborated with another two African American choreographers and dancers: Wilson Williams for whom he composed *Primitive* (1942) and Trinidad-born dancer Pearl Primus with *Our Spring Will Come* (1943). The latter was based on 'Our Spring' (1933), a poem by Langston Hughes, a leading author of the Harlem Renaissance.

His experimental approach has earned John Cage a rightful place among the pioneering figures of American modernist music and in the history of sound art. But it is worth noting that when discussing the musician's early pieces, the African and diasporic cultures intertwined with his compositions are always overlooked. Bringing them to the fore, by inviting one to consider the choreographed black female body, in the case of Fort and Primus, and what this represents in terms of lived experience, brings a whole different

set of keys to understanding these early works. It also provides the tools to conceive of some of the decisive chapters of sound art's history beyond a dominant Eurocentric narrative prompt to erase the non-western cultures that contributed to its making.

This critical rethinking, informed by a knowledge of other cultures, in this instance African culture, has helped shape the curatorial intent behind *Sounds Like Her*. This intent is motivated by the legitimate claim for women to be acknowledged for their contribution to sound art, and for cross-cultural approaches to be considered. With this comes an opening towards the diverse occurrences of sound and the way it is experienced, through and beyond technology, hearing, and its visual manifestations. *Sounds Like Her* aims to trigger a sensation of sound. It is an attempt to create a space for creative signatures to share their singular artistic practices. It also seeks to bridge one's own sonic memories, sensory abilities and sonic experiences, with the possibility to listen to different voices, and to listen differently.



Article on Pearl Primus published in *The Afro American* newspaper, 15 April 1944

Langston Hughes

Our Spring

*Bring us with our hands bound,
Our teeth knocked out,
Our heads broken,
Bring us shouting curses, or crying,
Or silent as tomorrow.
Bring us the electric chair,
Or the shooting wall,
Or the guillotine.
But you can't kill all of us.
You can't silence all of us.
You can't stop all of us—
Kill Vanzetti in Boston and Huang Ping rises
In China.
We're like those rivers
That fill with the melted snow in spring
And flood the land in all directions.*

Our spring has come. [...]

MOSCOW, 1933

How Does She Sound?

Salomé Voegelin

this is a love
poem cause i love
you now woman
who lived tried to
love in this world of
machetes and sin
i smell your ashes
of *zaatar* and almonds
under my skin
i carry your bones

Suheir Hammad
(excerpt from *of woman torn*)¹

Poems develop through rhythmic lines but not necessarily to a specific metre. Instead, they break the rhythm of speech and grammar to reconsider love and language along different lines. These lines are not drawn on a map. They do not delineate a certain shape, nor do they form words with lexical clarity. Poems eschew a given designation to instead call themselves from the margins – with insistence and with an increasingly raised voice, by their own name. And ‘if it writes itself it is in volcanic heaving of the old “real” property crust. In ceaseless displacement.’² It is love written as a verb and pronounces a self-love. An agency born of pleasure and determination rather than of guilt and expectations.

‘No, the difference, in my opinion, becomes most clearly perceived on the level of *jouissance*.’³ ‘Yes, I think love is where one is home, because there is the site of possibility where a lot can happen. When there is the conflict in the space of love there is also the will to process often from a naked space of difference and complete unfamiliarity.’⁴ This love is an emancipatory force performed in rhythms without a certain beat. Itself formless, it does not aim towards the stability of finding the familiar but seeks the enjoyment of unsecured connections pursued in sincerity but without an end. ‘... and yes I said yes I will Yes, says Molly (in her rapture), carrying *Ulysses* with her in the direction of a new writing; I said yes, I will Yes.’⁵

Love and pleasure are transformational for both bell hooks and Hélène Cixous. They embody a desire to share, to step into the exchange, to encounter and be with others without abandoning the self to perceived expectations. And without passive acceptance, but as agent of her own desires. In this the Mother’s love as maternal, caring and responsible is not marginal, removed from a public or paternal economy, but is its engine and source of possibility. And so, it also is the source of transformation that can unperform a patriarchal centre, dissolving its site and investment, without taking its place. Instead, the Mother’s love affirms the margins, to celebrate her significance as plural, displaced, moving and endless. Redirecting our gaze and unleashing new rhythms of love that speak in her voice: ‘to talk with angels face to face unafraid.’⁶

It is the margins at which, according to Rosi Braidotti, all the action takes place, while the centre is void.⁷ Since, while the centre is the location of masculine visibility, of sight as cultural norm, being mirrored in everything, he cannot see himself but sees everything mirroring him. Thus, he lacks the desire to subvert the infrastructure of his articulation and cannot listen to hear an unfamiliar voice.

By contrast, once love as verb and agitation speaks her name and generates the possibility of her real, it provides access to the thinking of the unfamiliar and the not yet thought. She can dissolve the centre without claiming it and comes to be heard. Creating a force that is not domesticated, in the house, out of sight, but which brings the home as a site of love and possibility into the public eye and ear – an ear that hears the transformative

power of her voice without turning a blind eye, for fear it might disrupt what appeared settled and singularly real before. And so, this unfamiliar, these syncopated rhythms, unknown images and unreliable sounds, conduct a new conversation and produce a different map. This map is not drawn on a flat surface and shows no straight lines. Instead, it produces unstable connections that expand centrifugally into the not yet told, and reinvents the world as a shared and capacious cosmos, as an indivisible volume of things which we do not know. Through their taxonomical organisation and fact, but from the dynamic simultaneity of what can be heard, and which we experience through the desire in her song that holds and activates the possibility of the real.

'He becomes a flower. And she is the sun'⁸

However, this volume is not smooth but created from internal frictions, and her voice is not homogenous, but sounds the strength of plurality and transformation. Her song does not share one pitch but opens into overtones and undulations that reveal the investment of the monochord and encourages a different practice: a sound-making and listening that does not recognise a certain form but works with conflict and unstable contacts on the benefits of formlessness.

This is the formlessness of difference, before it finds organisation and a lexical referent that places it at the margins and identifies it in terms of what it is not. Its benefits are those of openness and collaboration: the ability to listen and to hear the possible and hear even the seemingly impossible, the as yet invisible and inaudible, to bring them into song. This difference is not an abstraction, a matter of a different sign or category within the taxonomy of the same. Rather it is that of another practice: of making a different sound, voicing a different desire and *jouissance*, whose criticality opens our meeting at a different pitch.

Where does she sound? Who is she?

It is difference in the encounter, not suppressed or ignored, but practised in-between: in the invisible space between things, and subjects as things; where we hear connections, happenstance and misses, and exist entangled with each other, complicit and in conversation. It is the site of 'pleasure in the fullest, giving birth to conversation. It has something to do with the nature of the inventiveness that one brings to conversation of that kind, that somehow can get lost, and its boundaries dissolve as something new arises which is neither one nor the other, but a space in between.'⁹

This 'space in between' is the overlap of our dimensions, where unseen, we are toucher and touched, complicit and entangled in the 'new' invented in our meeting. While it remains invisible, it is the place from which the possible

becomes real and where the impossible inspires our imagination, unsettling what we thought we knew, visually and from afar. This in-between is sound's unstable contact. It is its being as unpredictable but reciprocal process of exchange. An insecure and unsecured connection that generates the world from where things are not, but from where their sound meets that of other things and generates their interbeing. Their being together and of each other, and where invisibly they generate a world from the possibility of the encounter rather than from the certain form of those who met.

Sound is always an unstable contact. Its movements and passing gestures perform formlessly what things are together. The invisible and indivisible connections that define them not as 'this' or 'that', 'you' or 'me', but as what they are and what we are with each other. In this way, sound as material, as concept and as sensibility of the invisible in-between, produces the truth of the nomadic and the simultaneity of interbeing: our inevitable co-dependence in a shared world. It does so without denying what we are individually, but by revealing instead how this individual identity is created in the in-between, the non-form that reveals how things are formed. It makes us hear the asymmetries and violence of formation – what unevenness determines the encounter; what has to be ignored to make a stable shape. This in-between makes us hear the excess and the unwanted articulations that have to be silenced to see a world of certain things, referenced by lexica and drawn on maps with black and red lines, confirmed through the certainty of named identities that have no voice with which to call themselves.

Against this certainty of formation, sound transmits in rhythms of transformation and change, that are not contained by ceilings, walls and floors; not contained by skin and borders as an architectural and geographical sense of space, as biological determination, or as a linguistic truth of things. Sound resists this falling into form. Instead, it registers the violence of formation and unperforms the certainty of forms. This unperformance does not negate the formed. It does not produce an anti-violence through non-performance, as an anti-nomic logic of opposites easily reversed. Rather, it creates an affirmative re-performance of certainty and definition. Practising the formless through desire, *jouissance* and love, whose formlessness challenges lexical descriptions and the ability to separate, categorise and ultimately hierarchise what things are, where they belong, their direction, and purpose.

Thus, sound as concept and as articulation of non-metric rhythms and unreliable shapes, makes us rethink the ideology of the familiar and the accuracy of the real. It also allows us to contemplate whether misses and happenstance might provide a more useful way to think of how things are and how else they might be. Since, from its overlapping dimension and the unreliability of its form, we can reconsider the connections and separations we make to conceive of the normative space of certain things

and a certain world. And we can engage in the possibilities of the in-between as a shared cosmos to access the uncertain world of unstable contacts and missed connections, to understand difference, and practise the invention of the new – where words do not mean along a horizontal chain of meaning producing a semantic sense, but where, in tune with the body, they mean as sonorous transliterations the possibility rather than the purpose of their articulation.

What does she want?

In this way, we find in wavering contacts an unstable but more relevant source for a reality and identity that are fluid and voluminous. Contacts that have the capacity to show the conditions of a current normative being in the world, and which offer the possibility for its resistance and transformation. 'And that is not done without danger, without pain, without loss – of moments of self, of consciousness, of persons one has been, goes beyond, leaves.'¹⁰ Stepping into the non-metric rhythm of an unreliable sound, to practise difference and create the reality of the encounter in all its possibilities, is fraught with the accusation of irrationality and the fear of being left unheard; with falling out of the accepted order, falling out of the logic of language and the organisation of things, their history and hierarchy.

And fail to please.

And inadvertently we go with fear rather than self-love 'for we have been socialised to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness that silence will choke us [...] for it is not difference which immobilises us but silence.'¹¹ Silence – not as contemplation but as denial of a voice, as a limiting and bordering off of the audible – mutes possibilities and rejects the possibility of the impossible. By contrast, difference creates the volume of overlapping voices, whose shared dimensionality opens up on the new and pluralises the real. 'Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.'¹² This 'interdependency of different strengths' is sound's emancipatory force. It resists the violence of formation and instead raises the potential of a formless interbeing and co-production that creates, in unstable but real connections, the freedom 'which allows the / to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.'¹³ To create a sonic cosmos from internal frictions and the stories not yet told.

This sonic cosmos is the sphere of Audre Lorde's 'interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences' within which 'lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true

visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being.¹⁴ This chaos of knowledge is her formless desire that unperforms the lexicon, history and the map, to hear other voices and sing the hope and preparedness for a community of difference in which the dominant can be unstaged.

However, this creative chaos.

The instability and formlessness of its knowledge – which is the site of pleasure, love, happenstance and misses that allows us to produce a contingent self in interdependent difference, turns us into active, capacious and entangled beings that defy walls and the violence of formation, and create the potential for plurality and transformation – opened at the encounter, in the invisible and voluminous space of collaboration.

Can also be abused.

Its mobility arrested
Its formlessness deformed
Its instability defamed
Its passing nature ignored
Its transformativity mythologised
Its audibility overheard
Its openness defaced

Because sound, just like Cixous's feminine, does not chase its own revenue, she does not 'recover her expenses'. Sound, like her, is not 'the being-of-the end (the goal)', but she is how-far-being-reaches.¹⁵ And this reach is inexhaustible, moving and boundless. It does not demarcate itself within a masculine logic of representation and thus remains misheard. Therefore, with the celebration of sound's emancipatory power and its creative formlessness comes anger about what remains inaudible, and anger also at having her economy of love misused.

*He has the visible world
She needs to sound its invisible possibility
to make space for her difference
and create the impossible.*

Sounds Like Her: A Curatorial Narration

Christine Eyene

Imagine entering a dark space. At its centre, a dim ray of light is casting just enough luminosity to make out the shape of an inviting bench. Silent at first, the room lets in the voice of a woman uttering a single note. Another female voice follows from a different position. More voices join in, emanating around the room. Progressively, the ensemble is forming a choir of its own, drowning the being in an immersive confluence of voices. Eyes closed, for a moment, time is suspended as the composition builds to crescendo before returning to single voices, then silence.

This sound installation is entitled *The Pitch Sisters* (2012). It was created by sound artist and DJ Ain Bailey who took, as point of departure, a comment made by one of her friends that they had observed a shift in the average pitch of women's voices. The friend attributed this possible change to the notion that women wanted to sound more authoritative – just like men. Feeling compelled to explore this assertion, Bailey launched an open call for people and friends to participate in a sound experiment consisting of women singing a single flat vocal note. The voices were recorded on her phone and audio recorder for less than a minute, in various contexts and acoustic settings, then reworked and woven together.

The choice of a specific note was informed by the line: 'The preferred pitch of a woman's voice is A flat below middle C' from *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* (1985) directed by Leslie Thornton; this was a film Bailey encountered at a screening curated by the artist Rosa Barba at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London in 2012. The key word in the above quote is 'preferred'. Preferred by whom? In conducting research for the artwork, Bailey observed that the concept of 'preferred pitch' was a hetero-normative one, tending to reflect what men find attractive in women. *The Pitch Sisters* builds on this potentially fictitious idea to present what a female sonic universe would sound like if women's voices indeed vocally hung around an A flat below middle C. Visitors are invited to consider this premise by stepping into the installation – a circular layout of eight speakers playing the voices of fifty women, vocalising the aforementioned note. While the voices are heard as one chorus, the overall sound line and the direction of each speaker oriented towards the centre of the room, creates an acoustic 'sweet spot' allowing for a distinction between the different vocal timbres.

The installation becomes a mesmerising environment providing a meditative, or near-spiritual, experience of the rich tapestry of women's voices, whilst questioning fixed notions of gender. It embodies the materiality of the recordings, from the assertive and the vulnerable, to drunken voices. Aural artefacts in the recording harmonise the sonic material, adding to the participants' identity by situating them in different places in the room.

This sense of immersion is also found in the work of Sonia Boyce OBE RA, in a 'silent' installation addressing music history and popular culture through visual representation.

In 1999, Boyce developed a workshop with a group of women from Liverpool, brought together with the artist, through the 'Collaborations Programme' of the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT). A statement published in *Paper: A Sonia Boyce Project* (2013), explains that: '[o]riginally titled *The Motherlode*, the very first session encouraged participants to sing and recall the first record they ever bought. The group's task was to build a collective map of black British performers. Shirley Bassey was the first name to be nominated, and from there the *Devotional Series* was born.'¹

Boyce recounts that Bassey, of British and Nigerian heritage, came to mind after the participants were asked to name the black British female singers that they knew. It took about ten minutes before anyone could name a singer. To Boyce, this temporary amnesia spoke to the importance of remembering these voices, and to preserving their historical contributions by materialising them in her own art and through collecting their music.

The *Devotional Series* (1999–present) is a mixed-media installation that has, since then, been presented in various formats. It has sparked a collective interest, even leading people to send Boyce objects and records. It has become an ongoing and ever-growing archive-based project. A wallpaper with names of 200 black British performers working in the music industry was introduced in 2008. It is one of the two main features of the installation in *Sounds Like Her*; and for this exhibition were added the names of Valerie Robinson and Harleighblu, two singers from Nottingham (where the show first launched) who are making significant contributions to the UK music scene.

The names are written in black on a white background and circled by elaborately hand-drawn repetitive concentric lines. These lines embody the intervention of the artist's creative hand. They also echo the idea of sonic waves emanating from the performers names, and resonating across this vibrant visual mapping. New elements were added to the wallpaper as a new commission by New Art Exchange gallery. These consist of placards of various sizes, brandishing posters, magazines pages, and other printed material about the performers, sourced from Boyce's own *Devotional* archive.

These new developments in the *Devotional Series* continue Sonia Boyce's endeavour to challenge the erasure of women whose music has impacted our lives; whose music should not be relegated to background sound, or to a mere footnote in the history of British, and the world's, music and culture. She does so by creating a multiform receptacle, a boundless repository of our collective memory.

Revisiting the history of black British female performers provides an opportunity to look further back in time, towards more ancient, traditionally female, musical genres that are part of Africa's rhythmic legacies. This is the case of bikutsi music that has been discussed in previous pages. This sonic

heritage is the backstory to *Sounds Like Her* and the exhibitions that precede it.² It is also a legacy that has inspired the practice of artists Elsa M'bala and Madeleine Mbida.

Elsa M'bala's participation in this exhibition partakes of her experimental, performative and participative approach. An emerging artist based between Yaoundé and Berlin, she began performing as a singer-songwriter, musician and poet, before venturing into sound art in 2010. Her work addresses African and Cameroonian history through archive material and the prism of feminist discourses. Her sonic experiments use her voice, acoustic instruments and technology from electronic sound machines, as well as found material on the internet.

Her presentations in *Sounds Like Her* include the display of a Cameroonian slit drum called nkul with sticks and, in headphones, recorded instructions of musical phrases performed by Abanda Man Ehang, an established Cameroonian master drummer teaching one of his students. Visitors were invited to play the instrument. This form of participation, and the interaction facilitated by the display of other instruments such as drums, balafon and shakers, resulted in a number of impromptu performances instigated by members of the audience. Accompanying the nkul was a fifteen-minute video editing of a sound art performance by M'bala at Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix gallery in London during Art Night 2017. The performance combined various aspects of M'bala's practice. In the final iteration of the exhibition, the artist further develops her participatory approach through a radio workshop giving voice to a group of participants.

While M'bala's work touches on the ephemeral nature of the 'here and now', and the aural chance encounters activated by the audience, Mbida's work is more about the still and physical presence of her radiant paintings.

Madeleine Mbida belongs to a new generation of Cameroonian artists whose practice refers to local traditions through the classical medium of painting but with an innovative gaze. The series presented here explores Cameroon's bikutsi music and dance movements. These paintings have a very personal meaning as they are part of Mbida's inquiry into her own identity through that of her father, who was a Beti (a people from Yaoundé and its surroundings to which bikutsi music is culturally associated) and who passed away when she was only one year old. As such, her work bridges both personal history and collective heritage.

Etegue Ankug (Hip Movement) and *Etegue Meko'o* (Foot Movement) both dated 2016 show interlaced dancing figures. Each painting represents one of the two binary genders: male and female. Schematically speaking, the group of male dancers could be identified by the shorts they are wearing, and the female dancers with their skirts, as well as traditional neck and ankle ornaments. The men are shaking their hips in a dance movement called 'etegue ankug', while the women are performing a dance movement with their feet called 'etegue meko'o'. These are two of the moves that

characterise bikutsi as a dance. The energy of the dancers is rendered through the overlaid outlines that represent both multiple dancers and the idea of movement.

Eight in Green and *Eight in Red* (both 2016), are bold chromatic combinations derived from bikutsi's quarter tone, 6/8 and 9/8 tempos. In these works, Mbida associates colour and music along the notions of rhythm, scale, pitch and bar. The colour grading is declined in stripes of six scales and the stretches of plain colour equate eight bars. The overlaid patchwork is organised according to its own logic, or painterly algorithm, with sequences set on a 6/8 pattern. The numbers inscribed on the canvases are both an indication of music tempo and a made-up pictorial sign intertwining 6 and 8. In other paintings, Mbida visually plays with the possible inversions between numbers 6 and 9.

Together the paintings convey the abstract nature of music or sound. They also speak to the invisible process whereby music triggers a response through body movements, in this case, resulting from long-lasting traditions. As a matter of fact, the hip movements found in bikutsi and other traditional African dances is also found in numerous forms of contemporary urban dances. In these transformed versions, they are not solely performed by African people or members of the Diaspora. They have become part of increasingly hybrid mainstream cultures.

The materialisation of sound is also a process that resonates in the work of American artist Christine Sun Kim. Kim's diverse art practice ranges from drawing, painting and installation to video, sound, performance and participatory projects. *Sounds Like Her* showcases drawings and video documentations of her performances.

Kim's drawings combine graphic elements, musical notes and text, sometimes in a minimalist aesthetic underlying a multi-layered symbolism. Being deaf since birth, Kim developed her own visual language to depict sonic environments. She employs elements from various information systems – graphic and musical notation, body language and American Sign Language – as a means of expanding their communication properties and inventing a grammar and structure for her artworks. As she explains in a statement:

By watching how sound works, I have learned how much it defines a space. Sound is invisible to the eyes but when people react and behave around it, it becomes visual. For example, I grew up learning in classrooms, mostly through sign language interpreters and they reflected (interpreted) sound back to me as visual information. The greater the feedback I get from people, the greater the understanding I have about sound. In many ways, sound converts a space into a populated place.³

In *Available Space for Composers* (2016), a title that plays on property advertisements, the viewer is faced with a series of eight sketches featuring

a variety of four black line combinations on white paper. The drawings resemble abstract visual sequences, geometrical forms or, when pushing one's imagination, could almost be seen as architectural patterns. The artist's words allow a better understanding of the series. About the lines she says: 'Those musical staff lines function like sign language interpreters. Especially with smears, bumps and pauses as feedback, you can see how sound (mostly speech) interacts with interpreters.'

And she continues:

Although these drawings may seem 'empty' with no visible musical notes, they are already notated on those hand-drawn lines and they tell stories better than black dots with flags. There are some parts that offer no feedback (no lines). That does not mean silence but rather sound that isn't significant enough to be notated. I call those parts (spaces) non-places. They remain anonymous, non-significant and out of our sight.⁴

Six Types of Waiting in Berlin (2017) translates the artist's experience after moving to Berlin from New York City a few years ago. She mentions how she has observed the difference of pace between the two cultures and has translated her observations into 'musical notes and dynamics, which indicate being either aware of time, or losing track of time'.

Each location has its own dynamics arrangement to which the artist provides reading keys:

Place a sound/voice in these dynamics and watch it float by

- p = piano
- pp = pianissimo
- f = forte
- ff = fortissimo
- fp = forte-piano
- pf = piano-forte
- sfz = sforzando, forced, abrupt
- mp = mezzo piano; moderately soft, louder than piano
- mf = mezzo forte; moderately loud, softer than forte
- < = crescendo; increase in volume
- > = decrescendo (also diminuendo); decrease in volume

Archives of Kim's performances include *What Can a Body Do?* at Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford, USA in 2012. The five-minute video documents Kim's early explorations into sound art. Kim participated in a sound performance using field recordings of ambient sounds she had captured from the college campus. The artist played these sounds along with her own voice, through subwoofers and placed wooden boards on top

of the latter. Ink- and powder-drenched quills, nails and cogs moved across the surface to the vibrations of subwoofers and speakers beneath. The resulting *Speaker Drawings* were then hung on the walls of the gallery space along with drumhead, subwoofers, paper, objects and wet materials, as physical and visual records of sound.

Another video documents *Face Opera II* (2013), a performance dealing with the importance of facial expression and body movement in communicating through sign language. In the performance, a group of prelingually deaf participants, including the artist, take turns in acting as a choir 'singer' or conductor through the use of face markers or visual nuances (eyebrows, mouth, cheeks, eyes) to 'sing' without actually using their hands.

Speech and language are further explored by Magda Stawarska-Beavan through *Mother Tongue* (2009), combining traditional printmaking with new technologies (digital audio). The series explores her son's speech development from his first cry, recorded as she gave birth to him, to his first words and sentences up until he was three years old. These sounds are captured in three-minute sonic segments triggered by the playful action of tugging the cord of a domestic CD player. However, the viewer is first invited to engage with these sounds visually through the marks on paper, and then to decipher the phonetic bilingual text and soundwaves.

In the three selected prints, temporary sounds are preserved as visual artefacts allowing Stawarska-Beavan to represent the passing of time and preserve the ephemeral moments in the development of a child's relationship with language. In one of the prints the diction by the parents and repetition by their son, of words in Polish and English, illustrate the passing of identity and language from parent to child.

In the *Transliteration* series (2011), Stawarska-Beavan uses text from the International Phonetic Alphabet, and graphic elements such as a grid and gradations of lines, to capture the ephemeral quality of sound and intimacy of a conversation. Like in *Mother Tongue*, the marks on black paper and typographical arrangements engage the viewers on a visual level, but the phonetic text obstructs the reading process. The meaning is coded. The viewer is led to look for familiar signs in the text, however to break the code they must sound out the signs and listen to their own voice in order to decode the narrative.

The text is based on a bilingual conversation where one person speaks Polish and the other understands the language but chooses to answer in English – which is called passive bilingualism. Any person able to read phonetics could still pronounce the words correctly without necessarily understanding their meaning. This work plays on the idea of reading as a dual process that involves understanding on a semantic level, and seizing words and signs as visual symbols. In both instances, the piece creates a tension between inclusion and exclusion as one witnesses the privacy of a conversation that is never fully revealed.

In *Who/Wer* (2017), Stawarska-Beavan's reflection on language and narration shifts from the printed medium to video. This split-screen photo and video piece places the spectator in front of dual views from an urban environment represented as a flickering of black-and-white still images of a man seen from afar in the streets and, on the right, a video of locked-down shots of city spots. The sound accompanying these images consists of the voice of a man speaking German coming from one side of the room and the voice of a woman telling a story in English. One notices that the flickering of the images is synchronised with the pace, or rhythm, of the man's voice. The interweaving of voices, simultaneous yet played out within distinct visual genres, language and a binary gendered spatialising of sound, creates the same sort of unsettling experience as in *Transliteration*. While the bilingual narration is accessible to a hearing audience, the interruption from one language to the other, and occasional overlapping of voices, does not always allow for a clear understanding of the narrative in question, in either language.

This piece is one of the developments of Stawarska-Beavan's explorations of urban space and soundscapes. It is premised on the idea that an unknown environment triggers a more attentive act of listening, a fact corroborated by the late composer Pauline Oliveros who observed in her introduction to the publication *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (2005), that:

More often than not, urban living causes narrow focus and disconnection. Too much information is coming into the auditory cortex, or habit has narrowed listening to only what seems of value and concern to the listener.⁵

Stawarska-Beavan took on this assertion as a departure point to recreate the complexity of the listening process in an urban setting from both an insider and a stranger's perspective. She was also inspired by the process of American performance artist Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969), in which the artist followed strangers on the streets of New York, while documenting this process with a camera and a notebook. Other examples that come to mind also include Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne* in which she tailed strangers in Paris in 1980. However, in this instance, Stawarska-Beavan 'bypass[ed] the element of randomly selecting an anonymous person' and asked Austrian playwright Wolfgang Kindermann, if she could follow him, within a five- to fifteen-metre distance, walking through his home city of Vienna. The collaborative nature of the piece is reinforced by the fact that the artist then invited the playwright to listen to her recordings of these meanderings, and respond to the urban soundscape in writing. This written piece, gathering Kindermann's fragmented thoughts and personal memories of the places he passes, became the story spoken in German, and the translation in English, narrated by both protagonists.

Linda O'Keeffe's *Hybrid Soundscapes I-IV* (2017) proposes an altogether different take on the listening process of a familiar environment. In this case, familiarity is not synonymous of a 'narrowed listening', blocking out insignificant sounds. Rather is it the aural canvas against which are perceived changes from within a known environment.

One phenomenon in particular raised the artist's attention. O'Keeffe explains that since 2007, she has spent part of her summers in a village called La Fatarella, in northern Terra Alta, Spain. In 2012, with the appearance of wind turbines in the landscape, she began to notice a shift in the rural community and natural surroundings. The increased presence of the turbines reshaped the audio-visual features of the region. It also started impacting on the socio-economic conditions of the local villages.

In 2015, O'Keeffe developed a series of soundscape recordings to document the changes in the natural ecology as it became increasingly intruded on by the constant whirring of the turbine blades. She also listened to the village's changing sociocultural patterns. With the influx of a new green techno economy, there has been a lessening of the region's traditional agro-economy. This has not created any substantial employment opportunities for young people, leading them to move out of their communities for larger cities. The village has become quiet as the voices of young people, children, leave the area.

This began as a journey into an examination of the ways in which new forms of technological infrastructures, designed to improve the environment, could, without deep interrogation, begin to silence certain ecosystems. Over the course of four years the artist travelled to Iceland, the Walney Nature Reserve in Barrow-in-Furness (northern England) and Beijing (China), to listen to the sound of hydro-electric turbines under the rivers and in the land. These journeys have included a series of collaborative projects with artists and local communities, including Irish composer Tony Doyle, with whom she developed an acoustic ecology residency in La Fatarella in 2016, working with artists from the UK, Ireland and Spain.

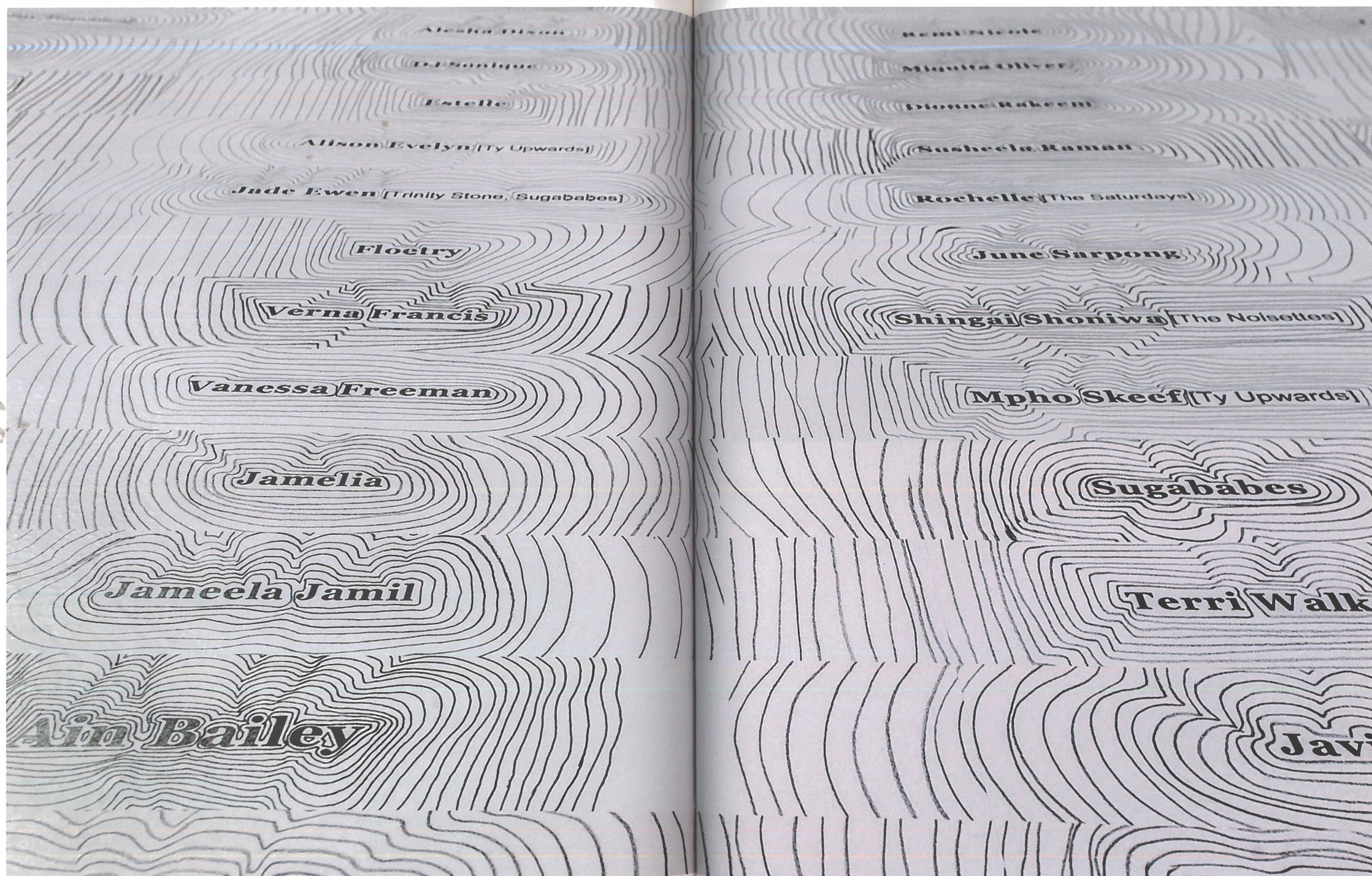
Hybrid Soundscapes I-IV brings together this journey as one work of art. It takes the form of four graphic scores, as well as sound and visual compositions. The audio work translates the artist's interaction with the communities, as well as the recording of natural and technological landscapes. It is an attempt to recreate an experience from each space, and find a way to collapse these four years of listening into one sonic composition. Although inviting us to reflect upon some of the adverse repercussions of a technology designed for ecological purposes, the sounds themselves still allow room for an appreciation of their beauty. And while each wall represents a different location, as a whole, the installation emphasises the non-linear way in which sound moves through a space and has an impact beyond its origin.

On this note concludes an imagined visit of *Sounds Like Her*. An immersion, at the core of women's vocal chords. An appraisal of popular culture, collective memory and traditional legacies. An exploration of the materialisation and symbolism of auditory matter, speech and language, through sound waves and vibrations, musical notations and linguistics. A suggestive journey leading right up to the act of listening to spaces within urban and rural environments.

Sounds Like Her is a collection of women's voices expressed both within the premise of their own body and beyond. It is a curatorial project that broaches practices whose anchorages range from diverse feminist entry points to broader positional discourses. It does so without losing sight of the complexity and multi-layered forms of female creativity. Most of all, it is steeped in the reality that, even within a disciplinary field that offers the potential to transcend gender identity, there is still a need for women to remain vocal both creatively and socially.



Sonia Boyce, *Devotional Series*, 1999–present
Mixed media installation



Sonia Boyce, *Devotional Series*, 1999–present
Mixed media installation



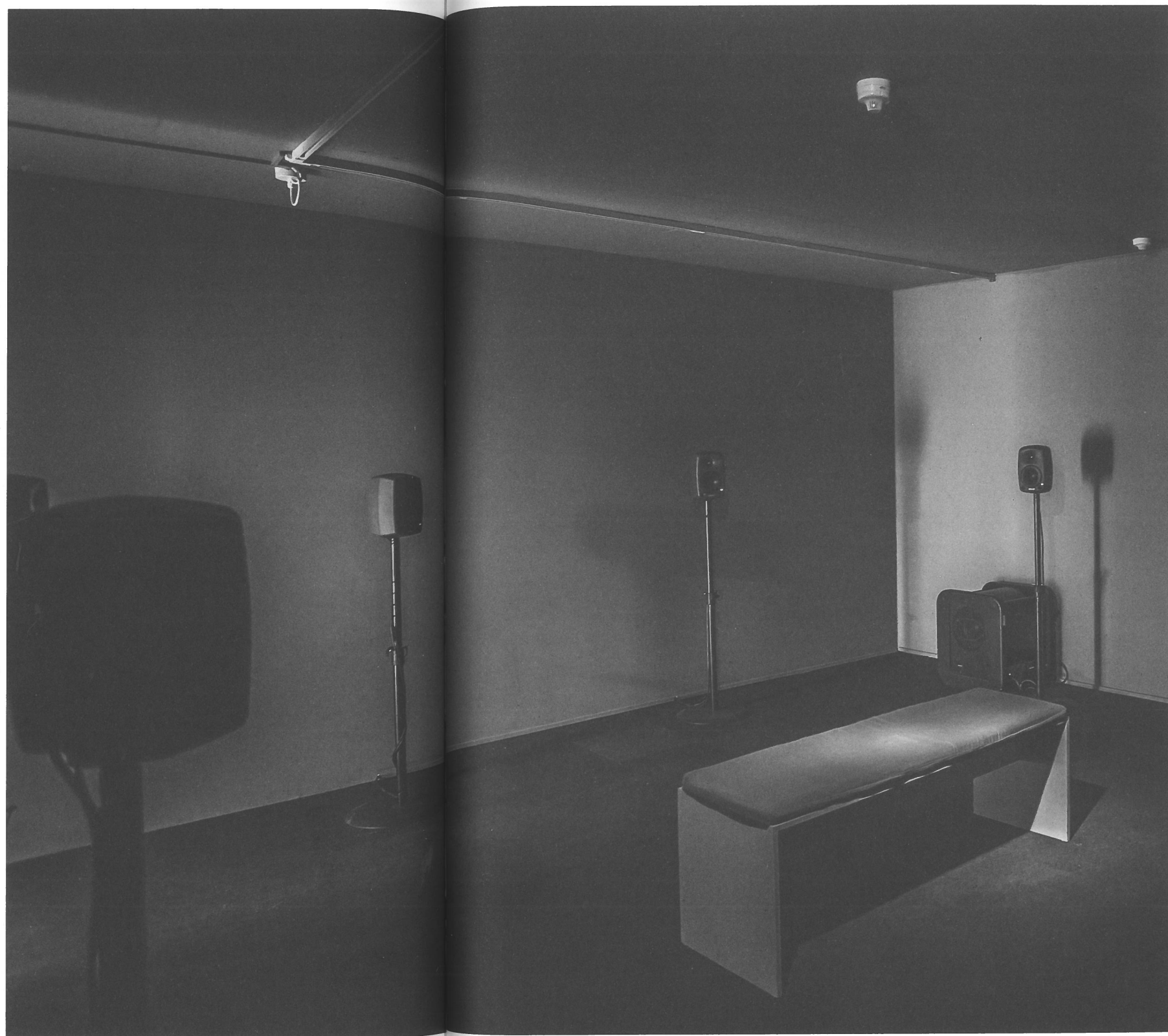
Christine Sun Kim, Documentation of *Speaker Drawings* performance, 2012, in 'What Can a Body Do?', Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford, USA. Courtesy of the Artist and Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery.

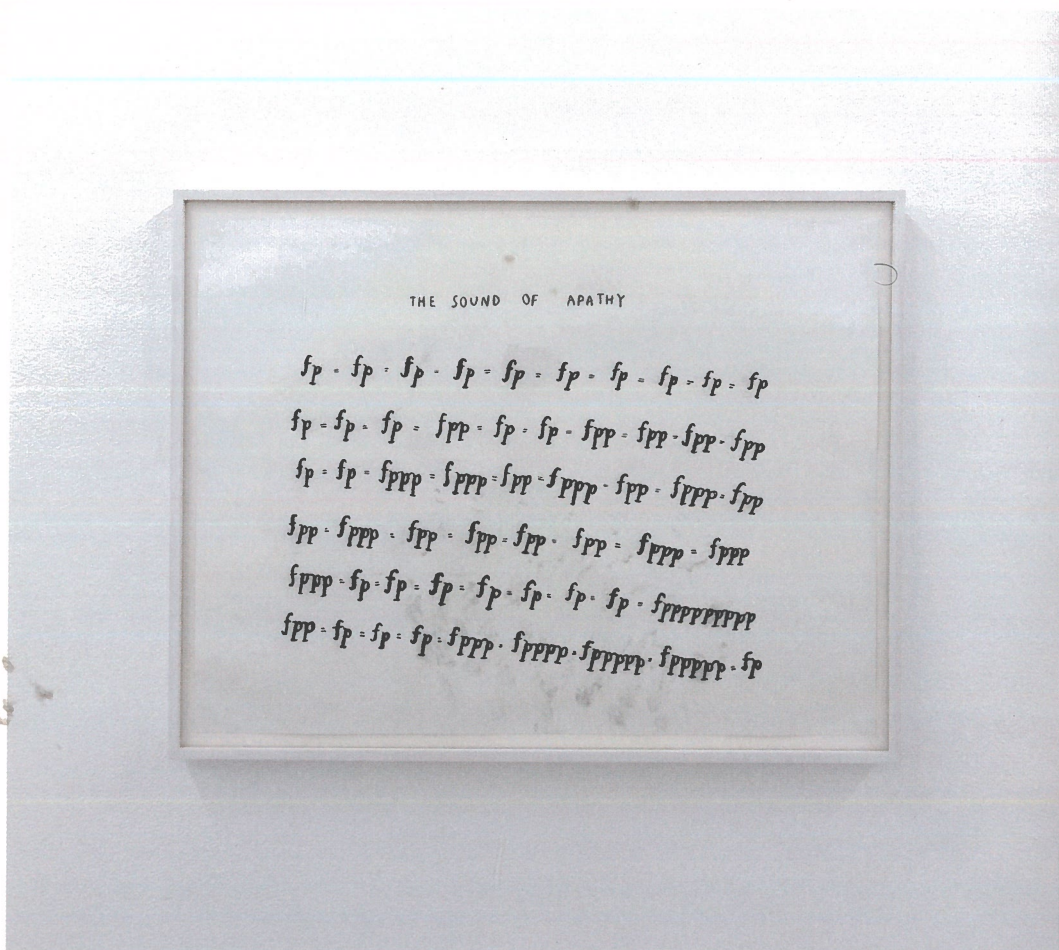


Christine Sun Kim, *Works on Paper*, 2014–16
Charcoal and pen on paper

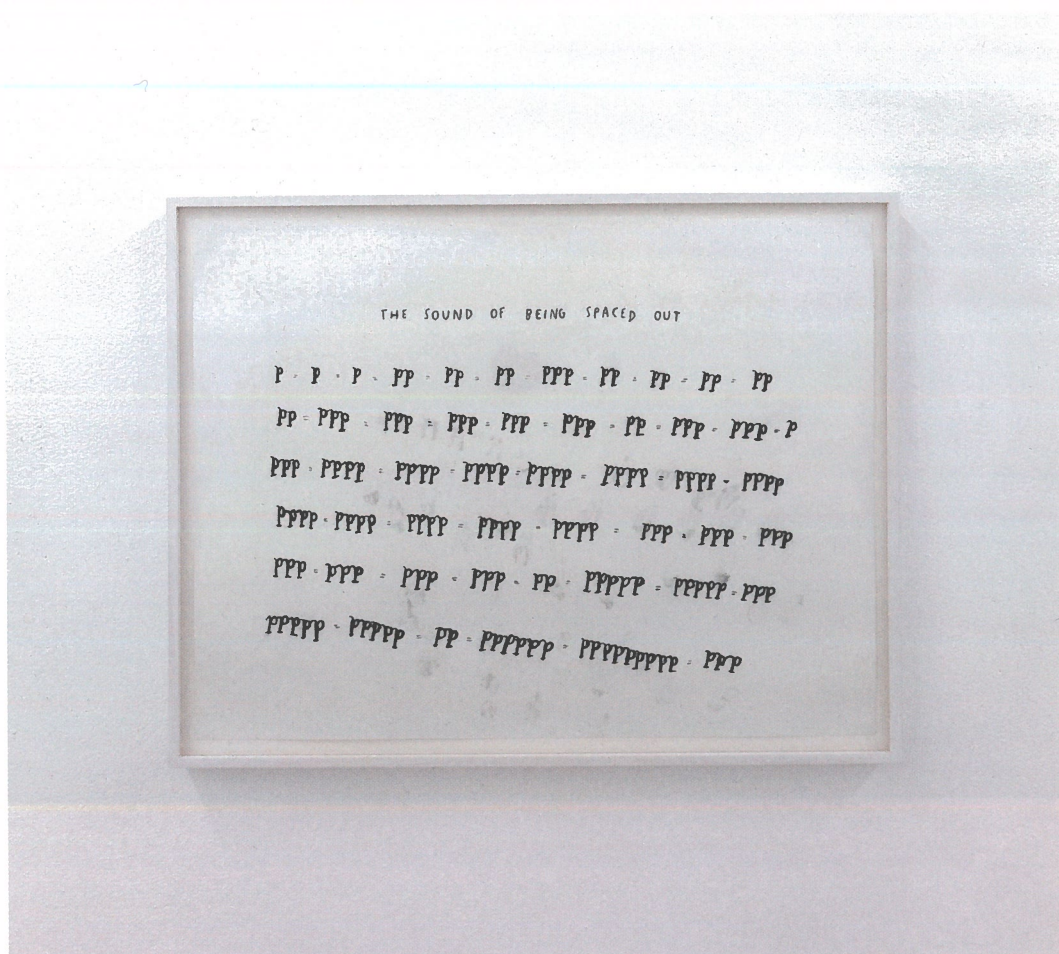
Sonia Boyce, *Devotional Series*, 1999–present
Mixed media installation

Ain Bailey, *The Pitch Sisters*, 2012
Multichannel sound installation,
duration: 23 minutes, 40 seconds





Christine Sun Kim, *The Sound of Apathy*, 2016
Charcoal on paper, 49.5 x 65 cm
Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.



Christine Sun Kim, *The Sound of Being Spaced Out*, 2016
 Charcoal on paper, 49.5 x 65 cm
 Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.

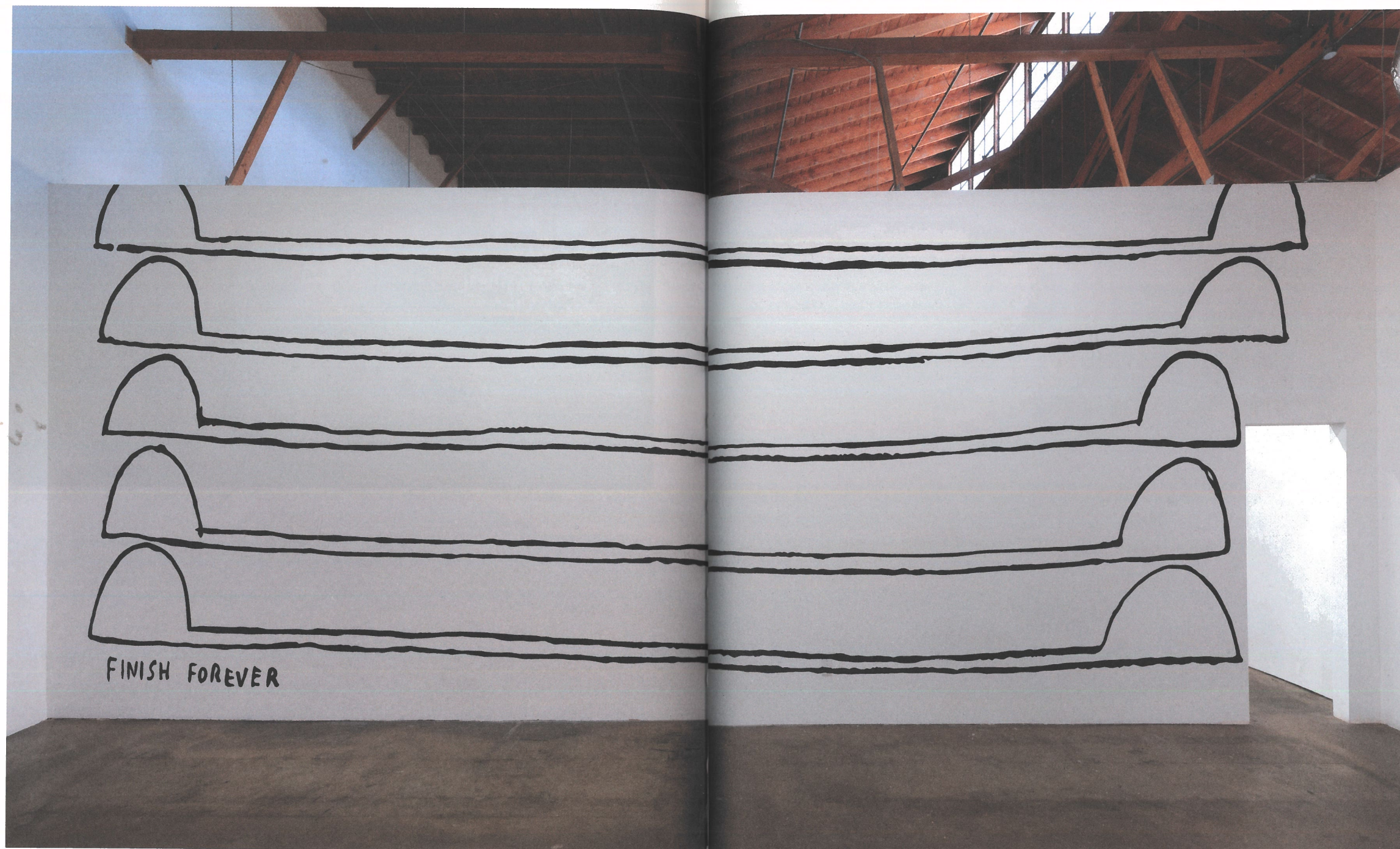


Christine Sun Kim, *Face Opera II*, 2013

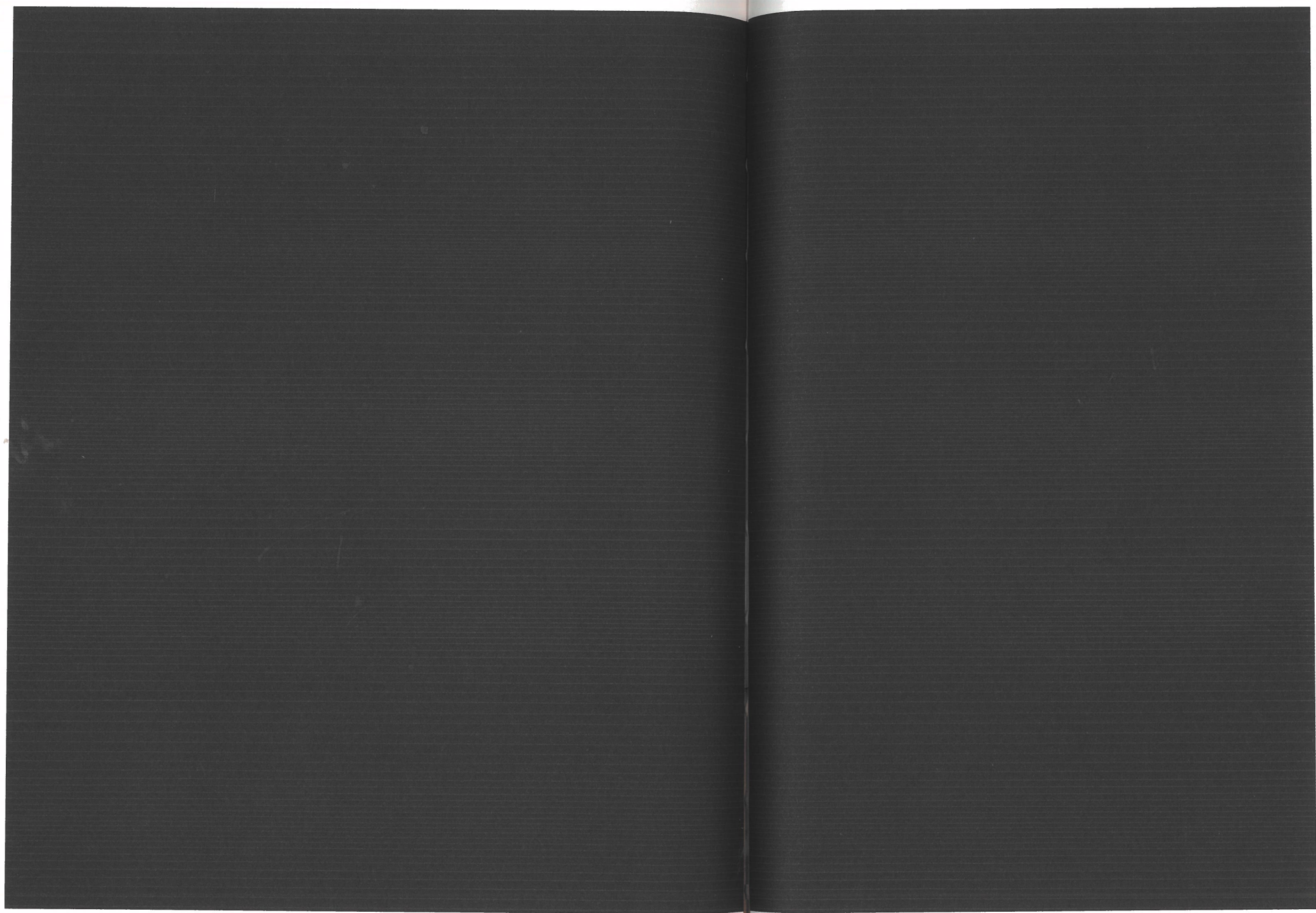
Performance commissioned by Calder Foundation, New York, for 'They might well have been remnants of the boat'. Courtesy of the Artist.



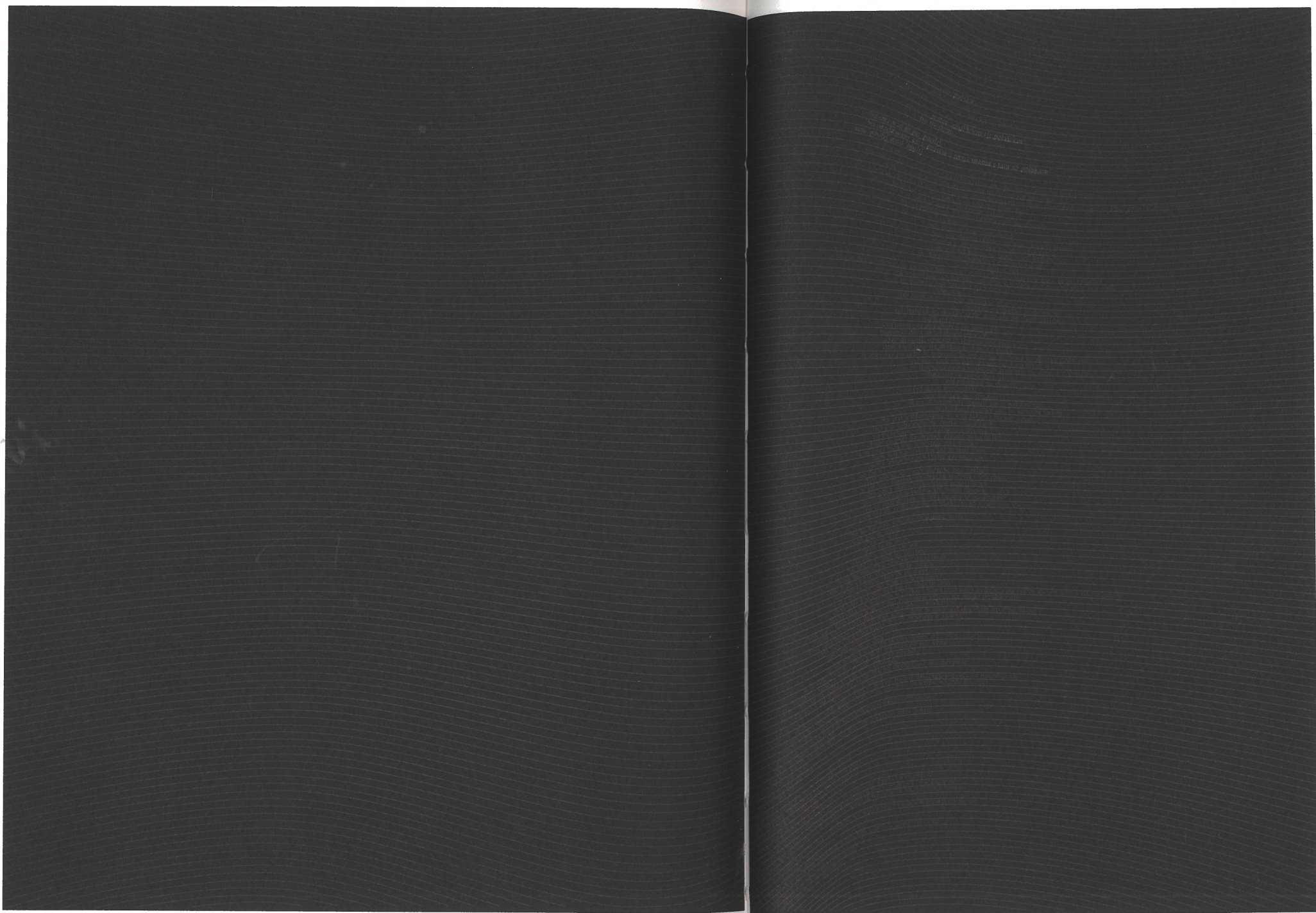
Christine Sun Kim, *Words → Shape → Reality*, 2018
Charcoal on paper enlarged to 425 x 1460 cm billboard in Jefferson City, USA,
commissioned by For Freedoms. Courtesy of the Artist and For Freedoms.



Christine Sun Kim, *Finish Forever*, 2018
 Acrylic on wall, 366 x 1105 cm
 Courtesy of the Artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.



Magda Stawarska-Beavan, *Transliteration I*, 2011
Screenprint on black Somerset paper, 119 x 82.5 cm



Magda Stawarska-Beavan, *Transliteration II*, 2011
Screenprint on black Somerset paper, 119 x 82.5 cm

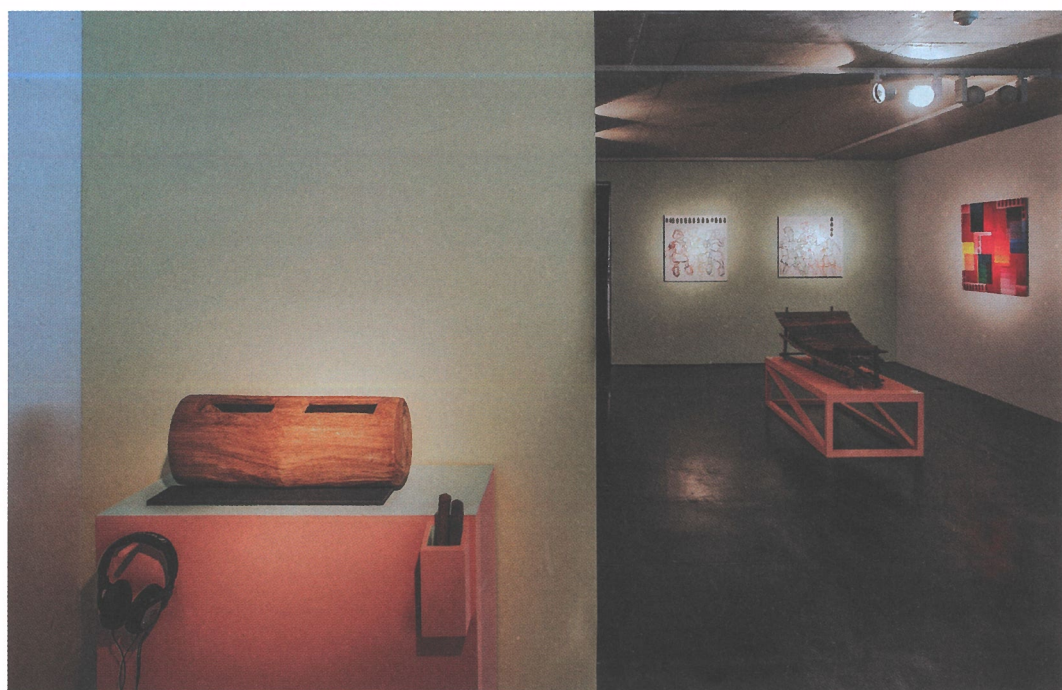


Magda Stawarska-Beavan, *Who/Wer*, 2017
 Video installation, duration: 16 minutes, 35 seconds





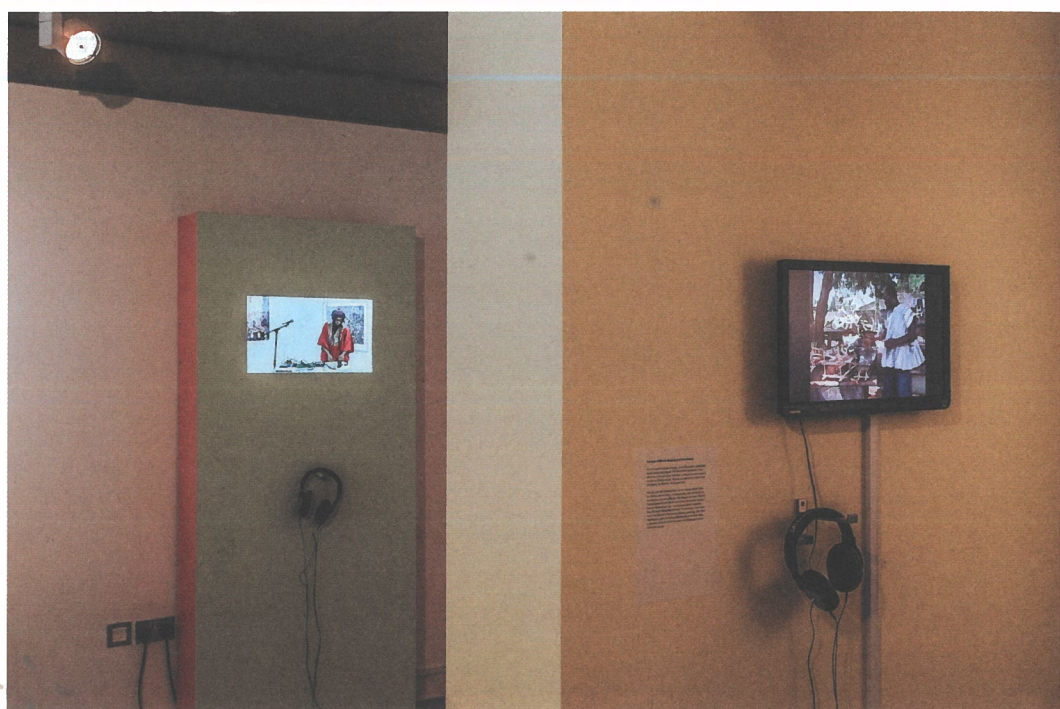
Elsa M'bala, *A sound art performance by Elsa M'bala, aka AMET*, at Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix, London, as part of Art Night 2017. Video documentation, duration: 14 minutes, 49 seconds



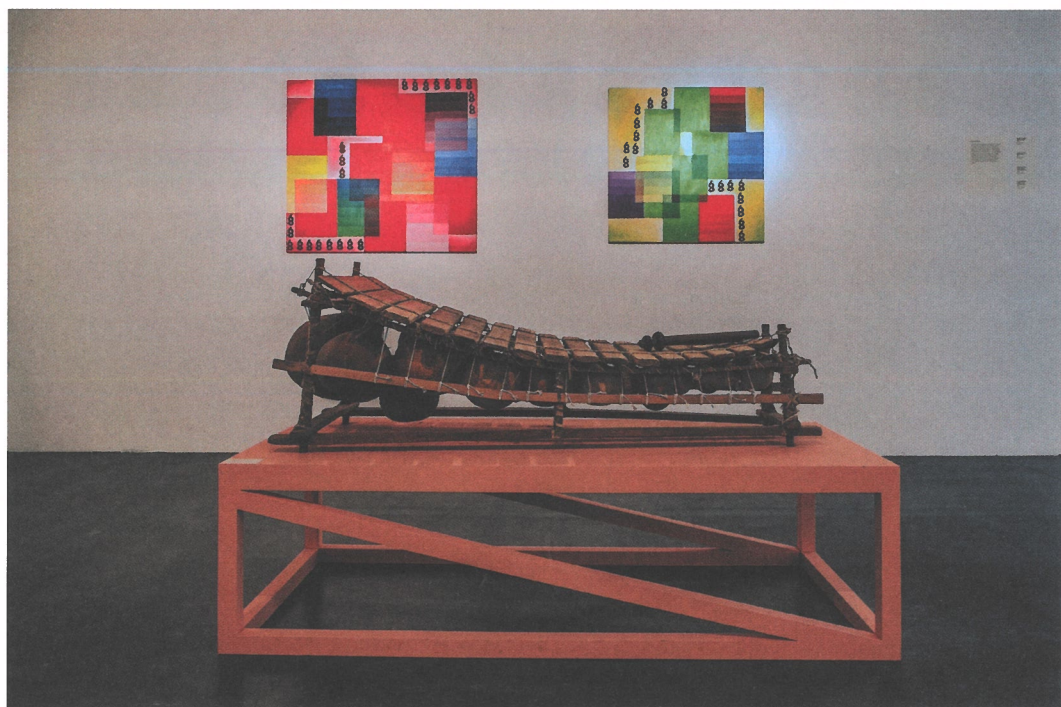
Elsa M'bala, *Bia Kud Si 3*, 2017

Mixed media installation

Image includes an exhibition view of works by Madeleine Mbida and balafon.

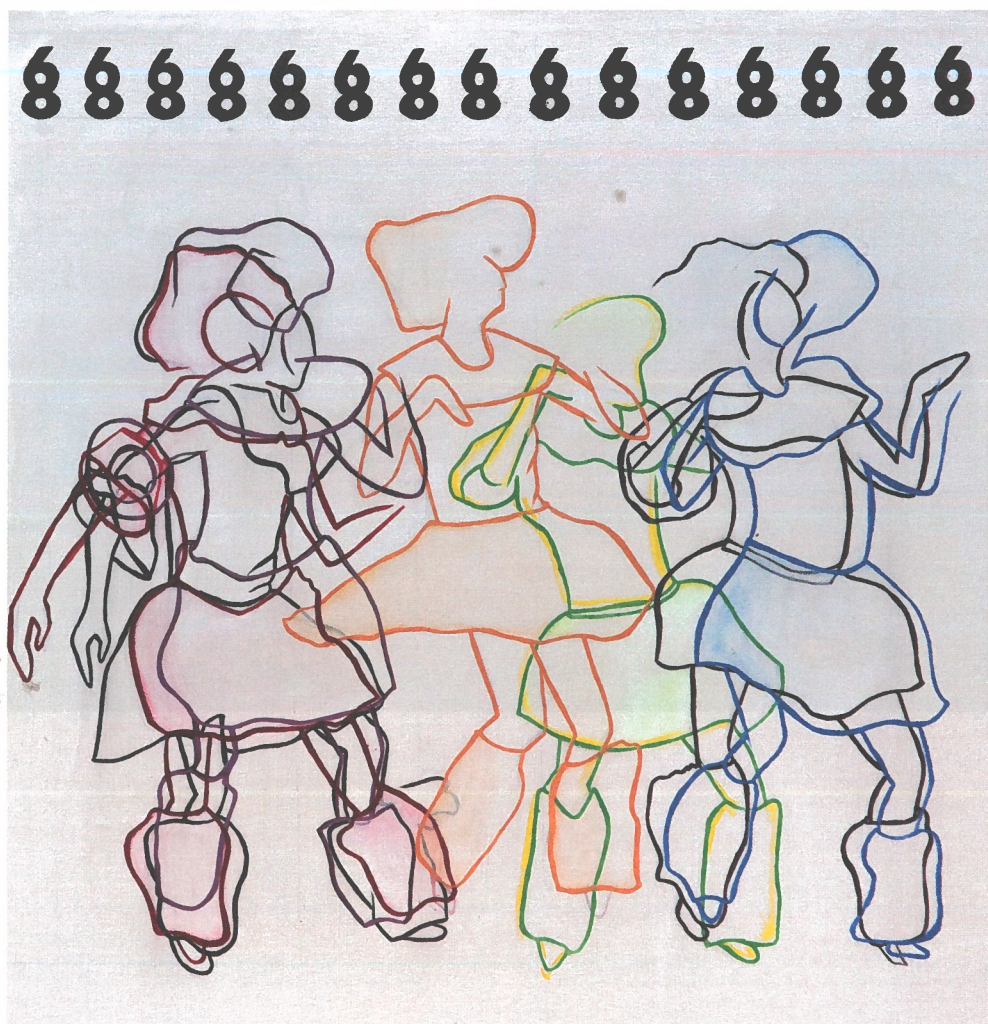


Exhibition view with video documentations of a sound art performance by Elsa M'bala, aka AMET, at Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix, 2017 (left) and the making of a Balafon (right).

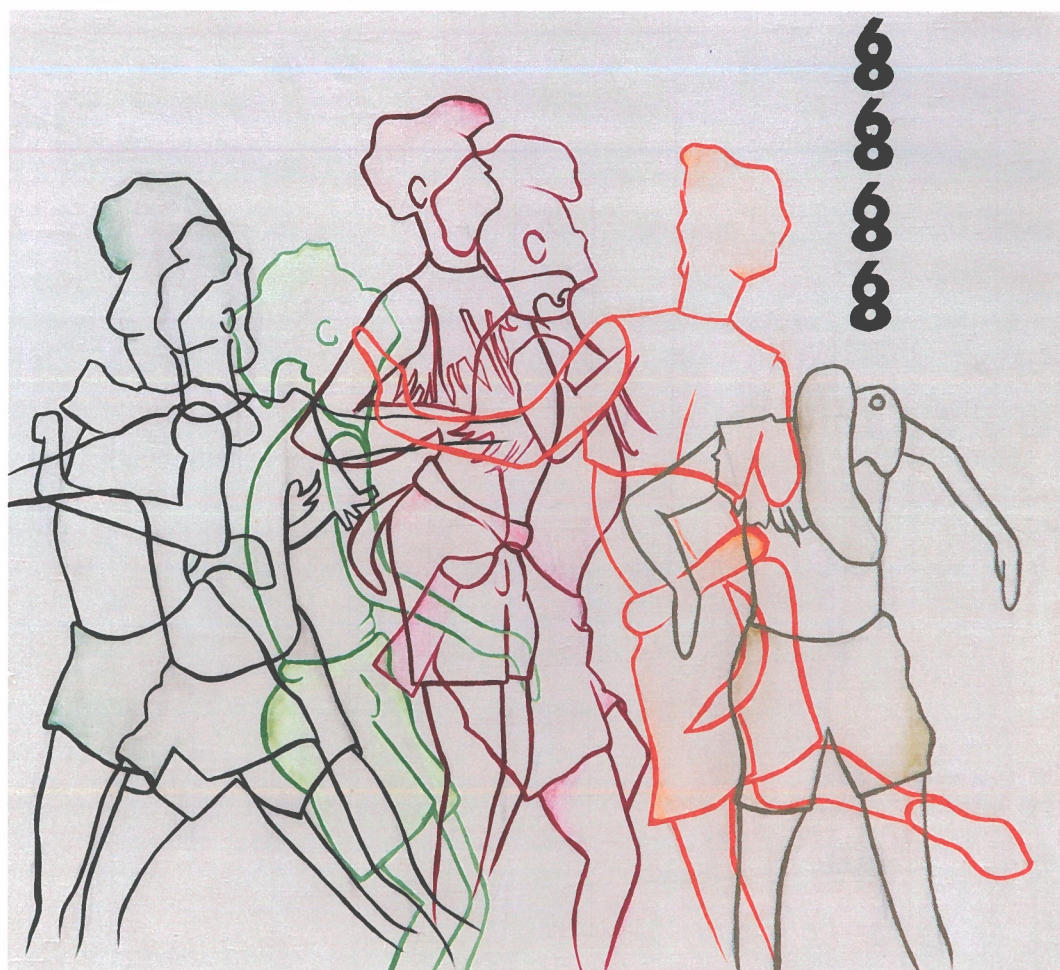


Madeleine Mbida, *Eight in Red*, 2016
 Oil on canvas, 99 x 80 cm
 Image includes an exhibition view of balafon.

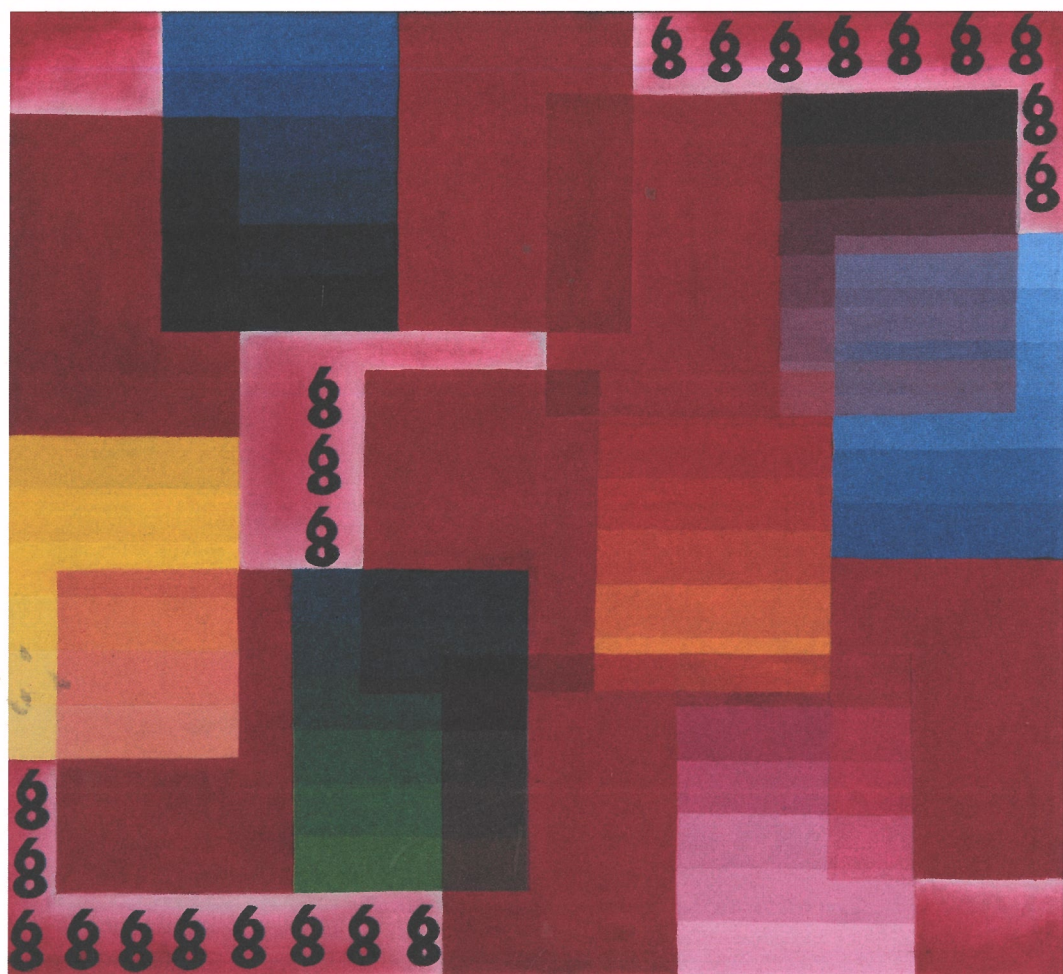
Madeleine Mbida, *Eight in Green*, 2016
 Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm



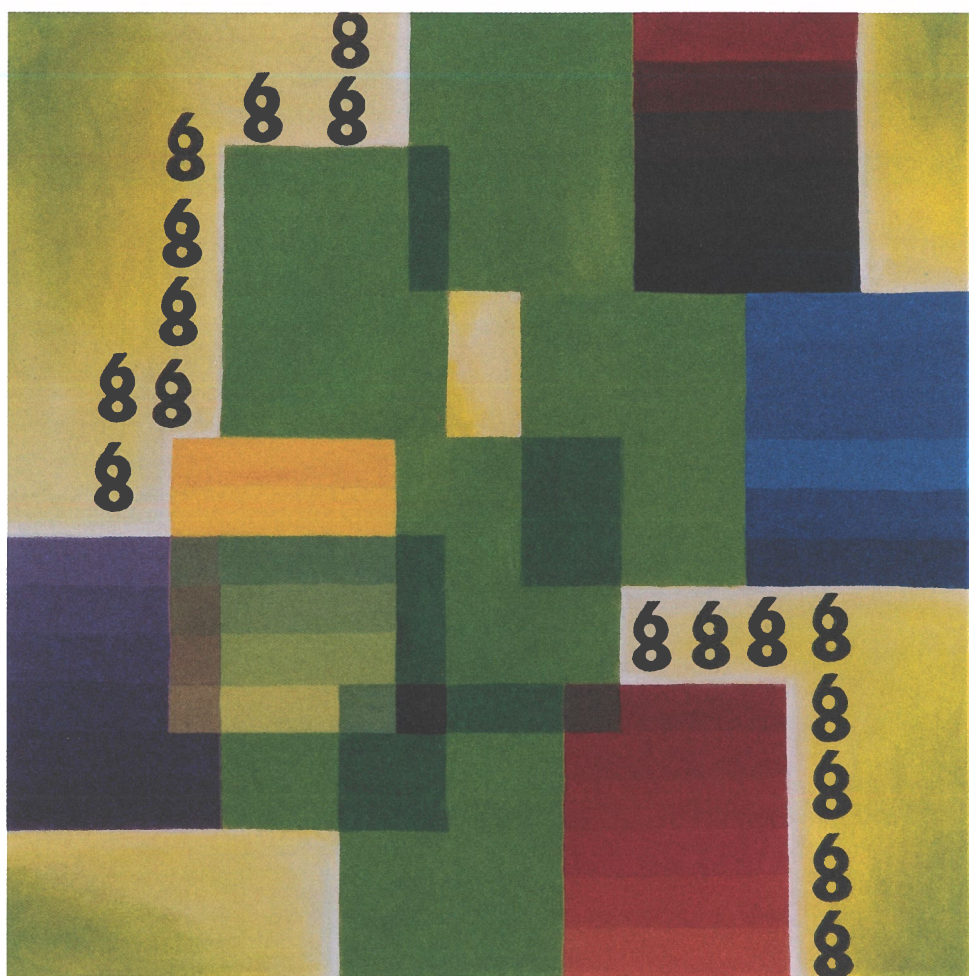
Madeleine Mbida, *Etegue Meko'o (Foot Movement)*, 2016
Oil on canvas, 84 x 78 cm



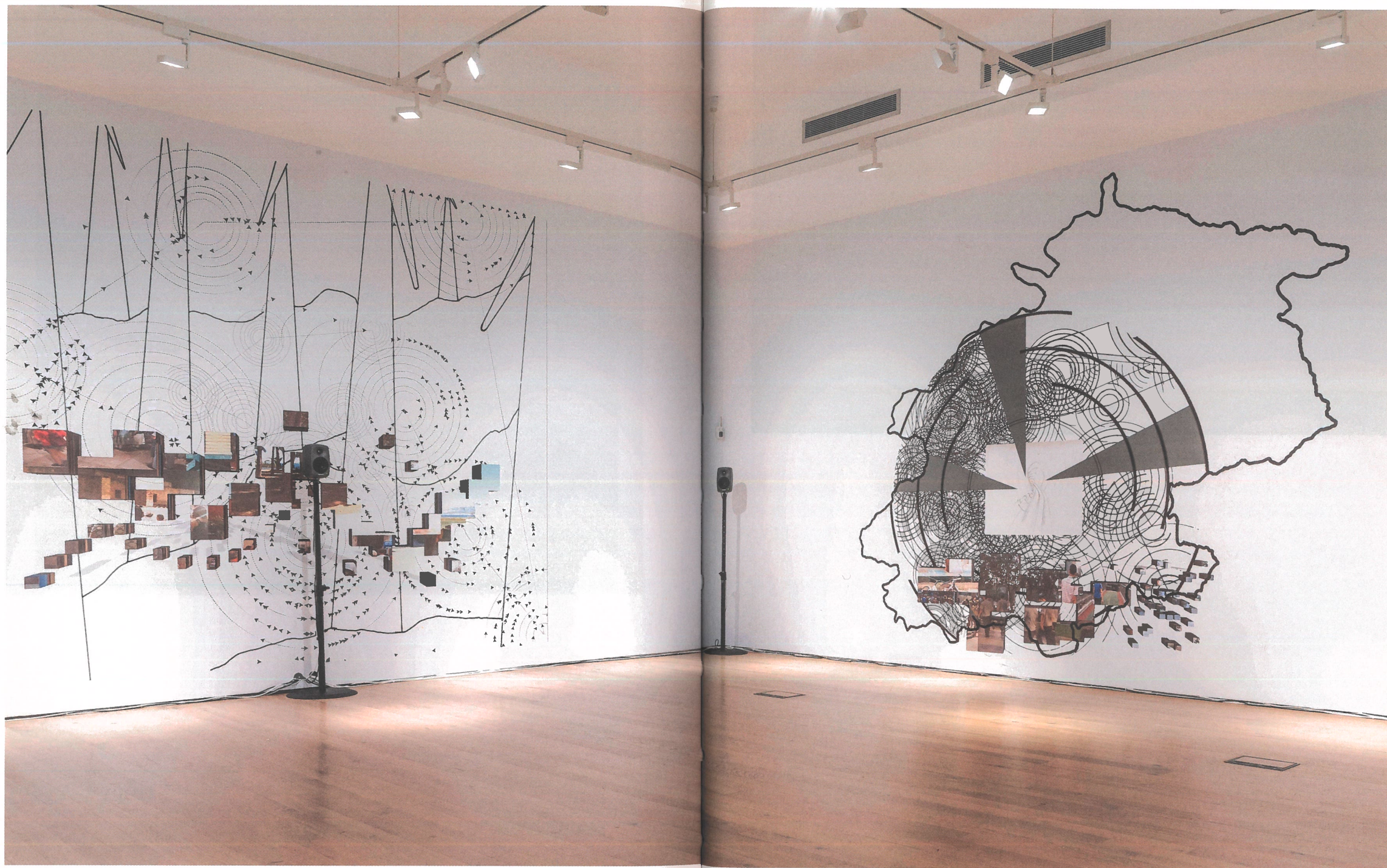
Madeleine Mbida, *Etegue Ankug (Hip Movement)*, 2016
Oil on canvas, 80 x 84 cm



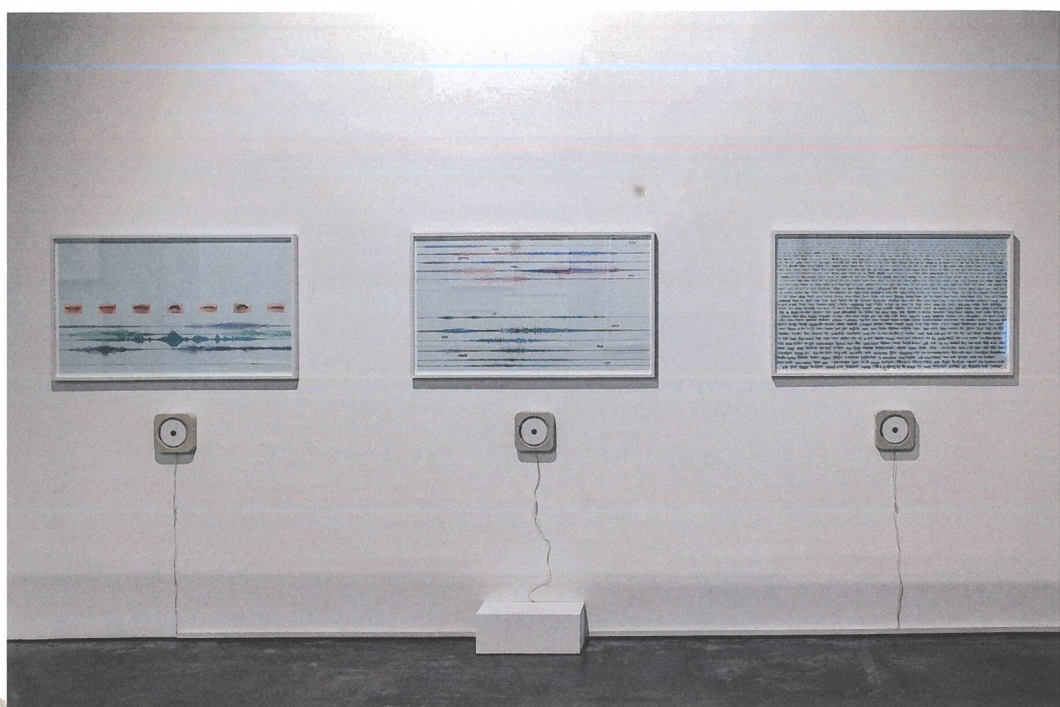
Madeleine Mbida, *Eight in Red*, 2016
Oil on canvas, 99 x 80 cm



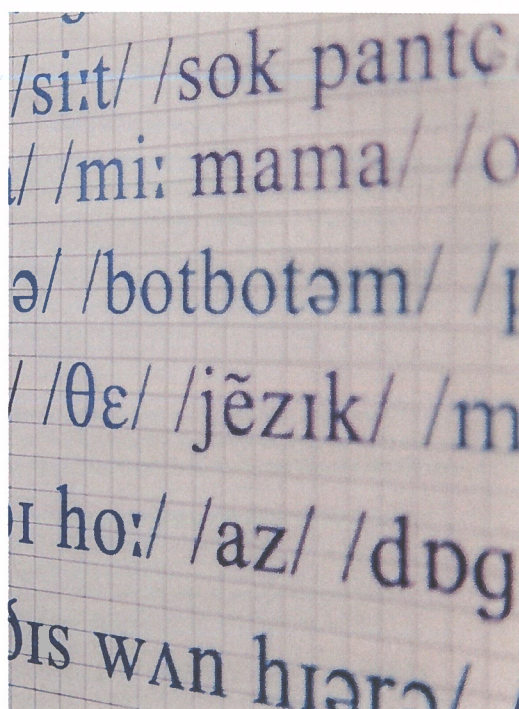
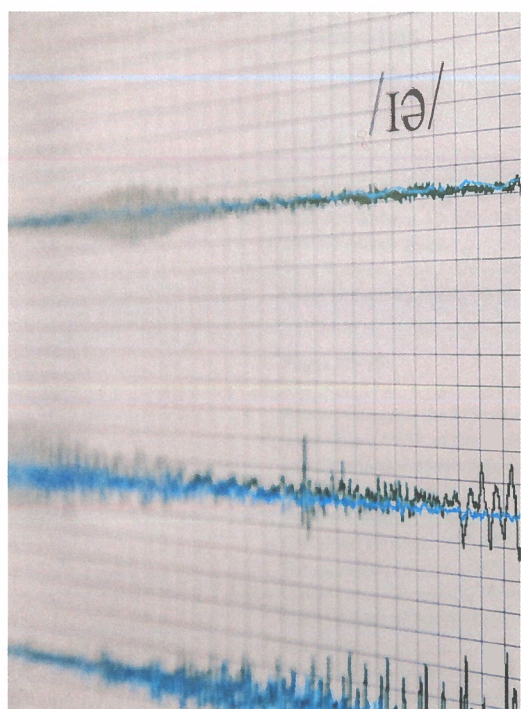
Madeleine Mbida, *Eight in Green*, 2016
Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm



Linda O'Keeffe, *Hybrid Soundscapes I-IV* (detail), 2017
 5-channel sound installation with digital prints on paper, dimensions variable,
 duration: 12 minutes, 10 seconds



Magda Stawarska-Beavan, *Mother Tongue II, III & IV*, 2009
Screenprint on paper with audio, 108.5 x 64 cm each



Magda Stawarska-Beavan, *Mother Tongue III & IV* (detail), 2009
Screenprint on paper with audio, 108.5 x 64 cm each

6
2
10

Endnotes

Pages 4–8

- 1 University of the Arts London – London College of Communication, November 2016.
- 2 York Art Gallery, 13 July–15 September 2019 and Gallery Oldham, 14 December 2019–7 March 2020.
- 3 Tara Rodgers, *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2010, pp.6–7.

Pages 10–15

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- 5 Notably Holly Ingleton, Irene Revell, Angus Carlyle and all the artists and academics that have been involved in *Sound::Gender::Feminism::Activism* in 2012, 2014 and 2016.
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- 11 Feldman, *op.cit.*
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- 14 Featured on the cover of *Homeland*, Laurie Anderson's 2010 album.
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- 16 Anna Raimondo, *Encouragements*, videowork, 2014, available at: <https://vimeo.com/9771134>.
- 17 Cathy Lane, 'Why Not Our Voices', *Women and Music. A Journal of Gender and Culture*, vol.20, 2016, pp.96–110.
- 18 Cathy Lane, 'Listening and Not Listening to Voices: Interrogating the prejudicial foundations of the sound arts canon', *Seismograf*, 2017, available at: <http://seismograf.org/fokus/sound-art-matters/listening-and-not-listening-to-voices-interrogating-the-prejudicial-foundations-of-the-sound-arts>.
- 19 Cathy Lane, 'Women as Animal, Women as Alien: Reclaiming women's demonic voices', in Julia Eckhardt (ed.), *Grounds for Possible Music: On Gender Voice, Language and Identity*, Berlin: Errant Bodies, 2018, pp.98–103.
- 20 Cathy Lane, 'Gender, Intimacy and Voices in Sound Art' in Sanne Krogh Groth and Holger Schulze (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art*, forthcoming 2019.

- 1 The essay accompanying the exhibition *All Of Us Have A Sense of Rhythm* was entitled 'The Beat That's Haunted Us Ever Since', David Roberts Art Foundation, 2015.
- 2 Recent examples of response to this situation include Susanna Eastburn, 'Take note – why do women composers still take up less musical space?', *The Guardian*, 8 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/mar/08/sound-and-music-female-composers-musicians-susanna-eastburn>, accessed 6 June 2019.
- 3 The nkul is a hollow-log drum. A model was presented in the *Sounds Like Her* exhibition at New Art Exchange, 2017, as part of Elsa M'bala's installation.
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- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.* See also Mongo Beti, *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976 (1956), p.77.
- 8 Stanislas Awona, *Guide to Dances from Cameroon*, Yaoundé: Publication de la Direction des Affaires Culturelles du Ministère de l'Éducation, de la Culture et de la Formation Professionnelle, 1971, p.87. The movement described recalls painter Madeleine Mbida's work *Etegue Meko'o* (Foot Movement).
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- 12 *Ibid.*, p.107.
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- 15 *Ibid.*, p.55.
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- 17 *Ibid.*, p.76.
- 18 Here I am referring to the Italian Futurist movement from an aesthetic viewpoint, with no adhesion to the politics with which it was known to be associated.
- 19 Senghor uses the term 'Negro style' which, replaced in his context, was perceived as a way to reclaim the derogatory noun – to some extent, in a similar way to how some African Americans in the US also reclaim the word, however, usage of the term remains a bone of contention. The noun is also the root of the name Négritude, the philosophical movement instigated by Senghor and his peers in the 1930s.
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- 21 A fact acknowledged by French poet, author and politician Aimé Césaire, a founder of the movement. Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme suivi de Discours sur la Négritude*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955 and 2004, p.88.
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- 23 *Ibid.*, pp.134–35.

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- 2 Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1996, p.97.

- 3 *Ibid.*, p.89.
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- 3 Christine Sun Kim in emails to author dated 22 July 2017 and 6 June 2019.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*, Bloomington: iUniverse, 2005, p.xxv.

Sounds Like Her
Gender, Sound Art & Sonic Cultures
Christine Eyene

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pp. 54–55: Jeff McLane
pp. 56–57, 58–59, 62–63, 74–75: Magda Stawarska-Beavan
p. 64: Christine Eyene
pp. 72–73: York Museums Trust

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